

Be The Reaper

CrimsonCobwebs

Copyright Information

This ebook was automatically created by [FicLab](#) v1.0.108 on June 11th, 2024, based on content retrieved from www.fanfiction.net/s/4021290/.

The content in this book is copyrighted by [CrimsonCobwebs](#) or their authorised agent(s). All rights are reserved unless explicitly stated otherwise. Please do not share or republish this work without the express permission of the copyright holder.

If you are the author or copyright holder, and would like further information about this ebook, please read the author FAQ at www.ficlab.com/author-faq.

This story was first published on January 19th, 2008, and was last updated on August 23rd, 2008.

FicLab ID: Eh3RGCRP/lxaezt87/50000E541

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Information

Table of Contents

Summary

1. Blue

2. Murmur

3. Song Without A Name

4. Mikoto

5. Call The Dead

6. Between Three People

7. Silence

8. Light and Dark

9. Escape

10. Becoming

11. Angels and Gods

Summary

title Be The Reaper
author CrimsonCobwebs
source <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/4021290/>
published January 19th, 2008
updated August 23rd, 2008
words 30,903
chapters 11
status Abandoned
rating Fiction T
tags Abandoned, Fanfiction, Final Fantasy IX, Games, Garnet A., Zidane T.

Description:

Zidane has returned and everyone's ecstatic. Everyone. Both living... and dead... Would you take up an offer to become a god? Could you ward off insanity when there's voices battling in your head?

1. Blue

I just want to say two things: firstly, I have disbanded many of my fics. To find out reasons and which ones, go to my profile. Secondly... ::takes deep breath:... I have finally come to terms with... the death of Vivi :sob: For ages I refused to believe that he'd stopped; it was just too sad... so I ignored it :grin: But in this fic... I have stuck to how the creators of FF9 intended and... :sobs wildly: Vivi... is no more...

On that note, enjoy:grin:

Blue

‘You are destined to live among the stars for all eternity.’ — Garland

There was blue. Infinite, depthless, neither here nor there. Nothing was and nothing ever would be. Yet there was silence, and there was blue.

But it was broken.

Something that was once solid, yet now nothing more than an insubstantial presence, stirred, and with that movement a chain reaction of tremendous proportion commenced. The blue began to shiver as

the presence sensed a corruption in the Chain Of Things.

The blue shivered again. Others were stirring.

Soundless voices rang out into the blue, all of one mind, all of one language. It was tainted with rage and anxiety. Confusion reigned.

(what... what has happened...)

(the tree)

(dead)

(no)

(then everything is)

(lost)

(no)

(where is the chosen one)

(yes the chosen one)

(will know)

(where)

(have to find)

(have to)

(dead)

(no)

(no)

(yes he is dead)

(no)

(no)

(wait)

(there is another)

(yes another)

(the creation)

(he will bring us back)

(but he wont)

(he will)

(he must)

(he is our new god)

(he is our kami)

(we must fetch him)

(I can hear)
(can hear him)
(sense him)
(feel him)
(kami)
(kami)
(I will go)
(Murmur)
(Murmur)
(yes Murmur will)
(Murmur will go)
(we must all)
(call to him)
(he must help us)
(he cannot refuse)
(it is preordained)
(his fate)

(destiny)

(he cannot say no)

(he will not)

(go Murmur)

(bring us back)

(bring us back kami)

(kami)

(kami)

(release us)

(free us)

(help us)

(kami)

(KAMI)

“How did you survive?”

The crowd was still cheering but it was quieter now, the climax had subsided. A few confused souls looked upon the pair on stage in awe, but most were

well aware of who the unexpected play-crasher was, and knowing smiles passed between them. For all, it was a pleasant surprise.

“I didn’t have a choice. I had to live. I wanted to come home to you.”

A handful of familiar faces weaved through the crowd and hoisted themselves onto the Prima Vista’s stage. They approached the couple slowly, not wanting to ruin the moment just yet.

“So... I sang your song. Our song.”

The couple on stage pulled close into a tight embrace, fresh tears springing into the girl’s eyes and tumbling onto the tailed boy’s jacket.

Unable to contain herself any longer, a vivacious little girl with a pearly horn crowning her forehead leapt into the lover’s vicinity and yelled: “Zidane you stupid, selfish, ungainly, think-you’re-so-high-and-mighty, secretive, little meanie! How dare you not tell me!”

The culprit in question tore himself away from his love and grinned down at the little girl. “Sorry, Eiko! I was gonna tell everyone but...” He shrugged. “I thought y’all liked surprises!”

“Zidane Tribal,” she pouted. “You should know from now on that I *hate* surprises!”

“So do I,” another voice piqued in. “It wasn’t very considerate of you, Zidane.”

The thief shifted his gaze to the silver haired dragon knight and his grin widened.

“But,” Freya continued, “I guess I’ll let you off just this once. It’s good to have you back, monkey-tail.”

“It’s good to see you, too... everyone!” Zidane returned, staring round at the familiar gathering. Suddenly he noticed a missing person and scanned the crowd expectantly. “Hey um... where’s —”

But Garnet, still clinging to his vest, had seen this coming and didn’t want the mood to end yet, so she quickly intercepted: “Come off the stage! The play does need to have an ending, you know!”

Seeing Garnet’s smile drowned any initial worries and he allowed himself to be led off stage by the young queen, thoughts so full of her it left no room for anyone else.

Tantalus resumed the play a little distractedly, while the reunited group split to give Zidane and

Garnet a little time alone. The couple weaved down the corridors, hand in hand, until they came to a balcony overlooking Alexandria.

“Aren’t you gonna watch the end of the play?” Zidane teased, leaning over the side and taking a lungful of fresh air. “It’s a good’un!”

“Oh Zidane!” she cried, melting to him again. “I... I thought you were dead... it’s been months... there was no word of your whereabouts and we searched for so long... I thought that... I just...”

“Hey, hey,” he said, “everything’s fine now. I’m sorry I didn’t contact you... it was selfish of me but... I was in a real bad way, Dagger. Boss thought it was best to... to wait it out, you know? I didn’t wanna come back and then —”

(kami)

Zidane blinked, words caught in his throat.

Garnet stared up at him. “Hmm?”

“What?”

“Sorry?”

“Didn’t you...?” Zidane scratched the back of his head and laughed. “Nevermind. I’m hearing things.

What I was going to say was, I didn't wanna come back and then die. I couldn't do that to you."

Garnet smiled, stroked his cheek. "I understand. But I'm still angry at you for putting me through all that worry, you scumbag!"

He laughed again, pulling her into his arms. They looked out at the newly rebuilt Alexandria, a maze of higgledy rooftops and crooked chimneys, sprawled amidst a sea of cobblestones. The sun was a solitary ball of flame in the blue sky.

Zidane looked below and spotted his old travel companions sitting on benches in the castle Gardens. Just seeing them again sent tingles of joy and gratitude throughout his being and yet something was nagging him but he couldn't quite...

"Vivi!" he said suddenly. "Where's Vivi?"

Garnet stared down at the group, up at the sky, at the floor, anywhere but him. She had so wanted to leave the still raw subject well alone, bathe in a happiness she had not experienced for so long. But she could not lie... could not —

"Dagger..." His voice was wary now, almost accusing. "Where's Vivi? I thought I saw him in the crowd. Is he by the stage?"

She sighed, fussed over her dress in an attempt to postpone the tears that were likely to fall. There was no use in trying to hold them back.

“Zidane,” she tried, but still couldn’t look at him. “I’m sorry but Vivi... Vivi stopped.”

To her surprise, the tailed boy laughed. “No, I’m pretty sure I saw him in the crowd. It was definitely him. He was wearing that crooked, old hat and —”

“That wasn’t him.”

“Yes it was. It was—”

“Zidane.” Her voice was hard, fierce. Her gaze pierced him and a bubble of sorrow eased up his throat. “I’m sorry, but Vivi has stopped. He stopped three months ago... and h-he...” Her voice broke. “He made sons... he figured out how to control the Mist and m-make more... w-wanted to do it b-before he...”

The world froze and the bubble popped. Tears pricked his eyes like hot pokers, the feeling of loss was the heaviest burden he’d ever carried. Garnet’s mouth worked silently. All he could hear in his head was a sentence that buzzed louder and louder until he near screamed it: “But I didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

Garnet gave him a startled, sympathetic look and touched his arm. “No one did,” she whispered. “He didn’t tell anyone.”

“But I... I d-didn’t even g-get to say goodbye...”

It killed her to see him so heartbroken. She wished she could wash it away, remembering how she felt when the news had reached her. Those long, dark, lonely months of mourning. Mourning for Vivi, mourning for Zidane.

The blonde sank to his knees. “He was so young...”

“I know. I’m... we’re all so sorry. But... he left you a letter, Zidane. He always... had so much faith and hope. He always believed you were alive... even when I... I gave up. That’s why he wrote you the letter...”

“I should’ve been there.”

“Don’t blame yourself. It won’t solve anything, and you know Vivi wouldn’t want that.”

Zidane wiped his eyes and nodded.

Garnet dropped to her knees beside him and pressed a hand to his cheek, sticky with tears. “I know it won’t be the same,” she whispered. “But

we're together now, and that's all that matters. We can finally get on with our lives. Start again."

Zidane offered her a watery smile beneath watery eyes, feeling a small butterfly of anticipation and hope fluttering in his chest.

"Come on," she said, standing. "let's go find the others. We'll talk about this later."

Sobered now, the pair joined the group hand in hand, who were waiting in the castle gardens. They observed Zidane's hollow stare with sympathetic, knowing looks and a few words were exchanged of Vivi, but the wounds were still too fresh and the subject was respectfully changed.

"What d'ya think you'll do now?" Eiko perked.

"Well I..." Zidane paused. "I haven't thought about it. Guess I'll stay here for the time being to give things a proper think over. If that's alright with everyone?" He was directing the question at Steiner and Beatrix.

Beatrix smiled warmly but Steiner's smile was that of mild distrust and concern. "If you are to stay at the castle you must heed the rules and entertain none of you scandalous antics —"

“Steiner!” Garnet barked disapprovingly.

“S-sorry. But he really... he can’t...” Steiner hung his head in defeat and Zidane laughed amiably.

“S’alright! I understand! I’ll be a good boy!”

“I’ve heard that one before,” Freya muttered under her breath.

“Aw, honestly, I’m not that ba—”

And suddenly it hit in a wave so forceful he thought for a minute his mind would implode.

(kami)

(kami)

(help us)

(help us kami)

(free us)

(save us)

(bring us)

(bring us back)

(kami)

(kami)

(KAMI)

Zidane clutched his head and cried out as the voices exploded his senses, pushing any sane thought away. He felt hands on him and fought against them, eyes squeezed shut. He screamed but the voices drowned out even that.

(KAMI)

(KAMI)

(KAMI)

(KAMI)

(KAMI)

(KAMI)

(KAMI)

Then everything melted into blissful darkness.

Don't worry Vivi's death won't be brushed over so suddenly. It's too big of a deal. If you don't know what 'kami' means then you'll find it on wikipedia... or just google it. PLEASE REVIEW!!!

2. Murmur

I would like to put a plea out to the whole of the FF9 fan fiction community: FOR THE LOVE OF GOD STOP WRITING SELF-INSERTS!! They're unimaginative and if I see one more I will start tearing my hair out. Thank you.

Clarobell:*blushes: thank you for your kind words! It's reviews like yours that keep me going!*

Icefoxer: *Thanks! Yeah, it's pretty obviously who the voices are lol, but then I didn't really want to make it a secret.*

Myshu: *Hey Myshu! It's always nice to get reviews from you. I'm still (im)patiently waiting another FF9 fic from you:pouts:*

Prozacfairy: *MWHAHAA, Zidane is never safe when I'm around! In so many ways...:wink:*

KASLiNN: *LOL Omg I couldn't stop laughing when you said that!! And now whenever I write kami all I think is 'paper' LOL. Hopefully you know I meant the OTHER translation :wink: Even though I know that translating kami into 'god' is quite incorrect, as it loosely means 'spirit'...but saying*

*that I have frequently heard it translated into 'god'
so I thought I'd use it, ala Death Note :swoons over
Ryuk: lol.*

M u r m u r

Zidane dreamed. At least, that's what he thought he was doing. He wasn't completely certain, for he thought that at the beginning he glimpsed his hand and he distantly recalled Blank telling him that a dream is not a dream if one can see one's hands. But these disturbing thoughts were pushed aside when he recognised where he was.

Pandemonium.

Grey machinery sprouted from the ground like rotting fungi, cords connecting them to the ground, coiled like sleeping snakes. Zidane looked up and saw Garland atop a platform, the same one on which he had stood less than a year ago, while informing Zidane of his heritage and fate.

The old man turned his obsidian gaze upon the genome. His skin was almost translucent, pulled across his skull like an ill fitting mask. His heart which had once flashed with an eerie, supernatural

light was grey and shrivelled, dead as the man himself.

“Ah,” he said, “there you are, Zidane. You’re late.”

The thief returned his gaze with the lack of surprise that often accompanies a person in unusual dream situations, as if the abnormal incident was utterly ordinary; a day to day occurrence.

“Did you want something, Garland?” the blonde snapped, crossing his arms.

Garland chuckled. “My, my. You sound more and more like your brother everyday.”

“I’m nothing like him!”

“Yes, yes, I remember you telling me last we met.”

Zidane huffed. “So? What do you want?”

Garland began descending the spiral staircase in a slow, almost laboured manner. “I am here to tell you, perhaps even warn you, that my intended fate for you is indeed about to play out.”

“Huh?”

“Did you think you could rid yourself of your origins so easily?” Garland laughed. “It is not over yet, my little creation.”

“Stop joking around!” Zidane yelled as the man approached him. “What are you talking about? Terra was destroyed, and so was the Iifa Tree! Even Kuja...”

Garland stopped a few feet away from Zidane, black eyes burning into blue. “That may be so, but you are forgetting one important part of my plan.”

“What? What? Tell me, dammit!”

The dead man smirked. “You will find out soon enough. *They* will see to that. Perhaps I have not failed my purpose yet, and neither you. With a single sacrifice you will finally become my angel of death, and Gaia will finally become Terra...”

“Never!” Zidane cried. “You’re wrong! I wont! I wont ever become —”

“It is too late...” And suddenly his image began to fade, whispering away like the distant memory he was. “Too late. You’re already rising... you are becoming...”

“Don’t you dare leave now!” Zidane screamed and lurched forward in an attempt to grab the disappearing visage of his creator. “I wont become your angel of death! Never. Never! NEVER!”

“NEVER!”

Zidane shot up in bed, beads of sweat trickling down his brow.

“Zidane?”

He blinked the blurriness from his vision and looked round, slightly disorientated and burdened by the heavy weight of dread and anger, remnants from his dream.

Garnet stared back at him with wide, frightened eyes.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “You were talking in your sleep. I tried to wake you up but you wouldn’t...”

He released the breath he’d been holding and smiled at her concerned expression, at the little lines of anxiety marring her complexion.

“No. It was nothing. Just a dream, that’s all,” he reassured her, then laughed. “Man, it’s nice to wake up and see your face again!”

His jest did nothing to quell her troubled visage however, and she said: “Zidane, what happened? One minute you were well and the next your were screaming, clutching your head...”

Zidane blinked and studied the room in which he lay. One of the guest rooms, he supposed. He tried to remember exactly what had had happened. He felt slightly odd, as if the room was too small or overcrowded; almost claustrophobic. It was a wholly unfamiliar and unpleasant feeling.

“I... I’m not sure.”

There were voices. So many voices... all screaming in my head...

“I just... my head hurt.”

Garnet cast him a doubtful look. “Your head... ‘hurt’? I’ve never known someone to be fine one minute, screaming the next and finally passing out just because their head ‘hurt’. What’s *really* wrong?”

He smiled. “Honestly! My head hurt. I’m... I’m not completely better from the whole Iifa Tree

incident. I still get headaches and stuff occasionally. My bones are still mending too... Look!"

He lifted his shirt to reveal an awkward looking bump and several red scars. "Broke three of my ribs and got torn up all over the place," he announced. "Nasty mess. Kinda glad it was Mikoto who found me instead of you."

She gave him a despairing look and ran a hand over his marred chest. He broke out in goosebumps and she pulled away, embarrassed.

Zidane cleared his throat, trying to ease a suddenly awkward situation. "So anyway, there's really nothing to worry about. Sorry I scared you."

"It's fine but..." She looked at him and he knew she didn't believe his watery excuse. "If anything else happens... just.... Be careful okay? I don't want to lose you again. I've only just got you back."

"Yeah, I'll keep you updated at regular intervals. Now, I'm starving! Where's the grub at?"

Garnet laughed. "I'll go to the kitchen and ask the chefs to rustle something up for you. Wait here and rest up. I don't want you collapsing again."

“Yes, mom,” he replied teasingly and hid under the covers and she tried to land a well aimed swipe to the head.

Alone, Zidane stayed beneath the white sheets and contemplated what had just happened. He didn’t want to tell Garnet the complete truth yet. He wasn’t even sure what the complete truth *was*. Had he heard voices? It sure seemed like it. But then again what he had told Garnet was true: he was still suffering from the wounds he’d received from the Iifa Tree. Maybe he was suffering from some sort of weird concussion.

And what was with the dream? He remembered every detail vividly, as if it had actually happened. That was impossible of course, considering that Kuja had destroyed Terra... but Garland’s soul had been trapped inside Memoria. Maybe the old man had come to warn him about things to come?

But if that was the case, and what Garland had told him was true, was he really going to become Garland’s angel of death? Was Terra finally going to become Gaia?

Zidane huffed and rolled over.

Impossible. There was no way. And even if there was a way, Zidane would never do anything to harm the citizens of Gaia. They were... his family. This was his home...

"I'm not like Kuja," he said aloud and had the eerie feeling that someone was listening...

He chuckled nervously to himself. *First sign of madness*, he thought.

(actually, that's the second sign. The first is hearing voices)

Zidane sprung up in bed, releasing a startled cry. He fruitlessly scanned the empty room but knew already from where the voice have come.

"Who are you?" he whispered. "What do you want?"

Silence.

"I heard you speak. Well... heard you as in... in my head... so not really..." He huffed. "Where are you?"

No reply.

"Dammit, answer me!"

Nothing.

Zidane bit his lip, suddenly feeling as if a million invisible eyes were all watching him, analysing his every movement. Waiting. Again, that claustrophobic feeling returned.

After several more attempts at making contact, the thief finally gave in and slumped back against the mattress, already doubting whether he had even heard the voice in the first place. It wasn't at all like the first time (if he'd even heard voices then), where it had sounded as if hundreds of people were screeching at once. No, this voice sounded cool and collected.

Garland, perhaps?

Could be.

Zidane shook his head, wishing for some company to distract him from the thoughts spinning inside his head. Which possibly weren't his own... possibly someone else's. A *hundred* someone else's...

"That's it!" he announced brusquely to the empty chamber. "I'm going out!"

Forgetting completely that Garnet had gone to get him food, he went in search of his Tantalus brothers. It was them who had nurtured the incapacitated genome back to health, broken bones and all, after Mikoto had located and somehow dragged him from the wreckage of the Iifa Tree. He owed Baku a debt that could never be repaid in his lifetime; the stubborn boss refused to leave the tree until Zidane's body was found.

Mikoto had returned for Kuja's body and buried him just outside of the Black Mage Village. Zidane even heard that she had erected some sort of stone monument over the site.

The thief found his kin at Ruby's Mini Theatre, playing a round of cards and drinking (several) rounds of beer. They looked up when he entered and stood in greeting.

"Zidane!" Cinna cried. "You okay, man?"

"That rat-chick told us what happened," Blank supplied. "Maybe you're not completely better, you know?"

Baku half-heartedly thumped him on the back. "You meant to be outta bed, boy? Or did ya drag yer ass back here so I could look after ya again? 'Cause

it aint gonna happen now you've got royalty lookin' after ya."

Zidane laughed and shook his head. "Nah, I'm fine. Dunno what happened. Guess I just kinda blacked out. Pushed myself too hard, maybe."

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "Freya said you were screaming in pain."

"Freya overreacted," Zidane uncharacteristically snapped. He was sick of people worrying over him. "I'm walkin', aren't I?"

They resumed the game and bought more beer. Zidane joined them, subdued and irritable, but a few beers later his general anxiety fuzzed away in his mind. He gave up on the game and settled by the bar, head resting in the crook of his arm.

It was while he was contemplating the slow ascent of the bubbles in his drink that it came again.

(kami)

He sat up, shocked, looked round. No one noticed. He said nothing but waited, listening attentively.

(kami)

He opened his mouth to speak back, but thought better of it. Best not arouse suspicion just yet...

Wouldn't want them to worry even more, he thought.

(that wont matter soon)

What? You can hear my thoughts?

(we created you)

Garland?

(Garland is dead)

I know that. Who are you? What are you doing in my head?

(we are not in your head. I am not in your head. We are everywhere. We are wandering. We are lost. You will change that, kami)

Kami...? What is kami?

(you are kami. You are our kami)

I don't understand. Who are you anyway?

(I am Murmur. I was one of the original scientists that initiated the genome scheme; I aided the

creation process of your genetic structure alongside Garland before I, too, was put under)

Zidane stared blankly at the contents of his flagon, desperately trying to process this bizarre and unexpected information.

Wait... so... you... you're a Terran?

(correct)

I thought all the Terran's were dead?

(only in physical form. Did Garland not teach you this)

Uh... it's a long story... If you're not alive then how... how is this possible?

(Terra is gone. Iifa Tree is gone. Garland is gone. I sensed a disruption in the cycle of souls and awoke... now all have awoken and we wander...)

Oh. So you're a Terran soul that's woken up? Damn. I thought you'd been destroyed along with the planet...

(where are our vessels, kami)

...

(where are our vessels, kami)

You can't have them.

(we need vessels)

(yes)

(we need vessels)

No, I'm sorry, I can't —

(help)

(us)

“Yo, Zidane.”

(we need)

(vessels)

(help)

No!

(kami)

(kami)

“Zidane?”

(please)

(we wander)

(cannot find)

Shut up!

(Terra is gone)

(you need to give)

(help)

(help us)

(kami)

“Yo, man, you okay? Zid—”

(kami)

(K A M I K A M I K A M I K A M I)

“ZIDANE!”

Zidane fell backwards off his stool as a hand touched his shoulder, sending his beer flying forward and drenching him.

The voices abruptly stopped and he blinked away the daze he had succumb to, only to find his Tantalus brothers staring anxiously down at him.

“Hey, dude, you away with the fairies or what?” Cinna yelled. “You totally tripped out.”

Blank shook his head. “This isn’t like you, Zidane. Something’s wrong.”

(KAMI KAMI KAMI)

“Shut up!” Zidane yelled, then clamped a hand over his mouth.

My gods, he thought, I’m going mad!

“Seriously, man, what’s up?” Blank pressed.

“Now listen here, boy. I’m gonna tell you what yer gonna do,” Baku boomed. “Yer gonna go back to the castle and get some rest. No gettin’ up and walkin’ round. Yer not well. You go with ’im, Blank. Keep an eye on ’im.”

“Yes, boss.”

Zidane stared at his gloved hands and shook his head in disbelief. This was crazy! What on Gaia was happening to him?

And in his head he recalled the ominous voice of Garland.

You are becoming...

Yay! I like destroying Zidane's mind and spirit, poor little monkey boy :laughs evilly: Oh oh! I'll give you three magical cookies IF you can guess where I got the name 'Murmur' from!! Please leave a review!! Thankies.

3. Song Without A Name

Thank you thank you thank you for all your reviews you amazing amazing people! I'm so glad people are enjoying it, and also, thanks to everyone who reviewed 'The Littlest Things'!

So you know, the name Murmur is from the bible; he/she/it was one the fallen angels that joined Lucifer in the crusade against God. At least that's what I read on the internet :grin:

Chapter Three

s o n g . w i t h o u t . a . n a m e

Much to Zidane's distaste, Blank reported back to Garnet exactly what happened at Ruby's Mini Theatre. She had been angry that he'd left the castle without telling her in the first place, but thanks to Blank, now she was shocked *and* angry.

"Zidane," she said, "you're not well, and I'm worried. You haven't been yourself. Please, tell us what's wrong and we'll have Doctor Tot see to it immediately."

I don't think medicine can cure whatever I have, Zidane thought wryly. "I told you, Dagger. I haven't fully recovered from the Iifa Tree ordeal."

"That may be true," Blank returned, "but I don't remember your symptoms being like this. Whatever's wrong now is something completely different."

Damn, Zidane thought, *how can this guy be so freakin' perceptive?* "Just leave it, okay? I promise I'll get some rest and won't leave the castle until I'm better. How's that?"

Garnet cast him a despairing look. "I don't... I don't want to trap you here... if you'd rather be with your Tantalus brothers..."

"No, no!" Zidane quickly intervened, lightly gripping her arms. "That's not it at all. I'll stay with you."

She nodded, albeit reluctantly. Blank left the couple alone in the queen's vast chamber, and they stared out the window at the sky, splashed with the fiery palate of sunset. Zidane trailed a hand up her back and nuzzled her hair affectionately, failing to notice her stiffen beneath his touch.

(kami)

Surprisingly, this intrusion did not startle the genome as it had times before. The familiar, self-assertive voice whispered almost respectfully in the edges of his mind, yet it failed to quell his initial anger.

What now?

(kami, our vessels cannot be used)

What are you talking about?

(they cannot be used)

Zidane bit his lip in frustration. *Is that you, Murmur?*

(affirmative)

Go away. Quit bothering me. There's nothing I can do.

(... you are kami. You are to be the angel)

No I'm not. I refused to go down that path. Now leave me alone.

(you cannot deny your fate)

Watch me.

(I have no way of doing that, for I am without a vessel. The vessels cannot be used)

Zidane sighed irritably.

“What?”

He jumped. He had completely forgotten Garnet’s presence and her clipped question tore him from the voice inside his head.

“Oh err... nothing. Just thinking.”

(the vessels have somehow produced souls)

“About what?”

(we cannot use the vessels)

“Erm...”

(you need to find us new vessels, kami)

“What’s wrong Zidane?”

Gods, this is confusing. Shut up a minute
Murmur.

(...)

“Just thinking about... about... how ill I am,” he replied finally.

“Oh,” she said, and smiled. “You’ll get better after a few days rest.”

Yeah, right.

(what is right)

“I wasn’t talking to you,” he said aloud, then stiffened and bit his lip, cursing the instinctive reaction.

Garnet turned to stare at him, hurt and confused by the anger infused within his tone. “What? What do you mean? There’s no one else here... don’t you want to talk to me?”

Zidane could have screamed in frustration. He willed his tone to stay neutral. “Of *course* I want to talk to you. I’m sorry... Guess I hit my head harder ___”

(kami)

SHUT UP!

“...than I thought...”

Garnet frowned, clearly worried. She bid him lay down in bed and he did so.

“Come lay with me,” he enticed, patting the bed sheets.

She took a step way, looking slightly flustered. “I... I cannot. It’s not proper.”

Zidane stared at her, bemused. “Not... proper? But I thought... you know... that we were... are... an... an... item?”

The queen stared at the floor, a ghost of a smile upon her porcelain features. “Yes, I know. We are. I love you, Zidane, more than anything this world has to offer... but... I’m just not ready yet... for anything like... that...”

“Oh,” he said, struggling to keep the disappointment from his voice. “That’s fine. I can wait! I’ll wait a lifetime if I have to!”

She smiled and brushed a blonde lock from his azure eyes. “Thank you, Zidane. That means a lot to me. Now get some rest.”

He nodded and watched her exit the chamber, the smile fading quickly.

Of course he’d wait. There was no rush.

(you must rush)

Excuse me? I don't think that's any of your business, thanks very much.

(the vessels. We must have vessels), Murmur replied urgently, missing the point.

You don't get nothing, Zidane snapped. You can't use the genomes as vessels anymore so you're stuck, aren't you?

(yes. We are stuck, left to wander this limbo for all eternity unless we have vessels. Kami, only you can provide us with them)

No. I'm not a kami, and I'm not an angel. From now I'm just plain ol' Zidane... so bugger off, if you please.

(you cannot deny your fate)

Geez, it's like talking to a broken record! Leave me alone!

(help us, kami)

I said fuck off, Murmur!

(you cannot deny your fate)

Fuck off!

(you are becoming)

“FUCK OFF!”

Zidane clamped his hand over his mouth, eyes bulging. He listened for any sounds that would betray lurkers outside his doorway, but none came. He released a heavy sigh, glad now that Murmur had dispersed. Even if it was for only a little while.

Outside the double doors, Garnet listened, her eyes watering.

Something was wrong with Zidane, and once again she felt unable to help him.

0000

Two long days past and Zidane was becoming restless, caged within the castle. Of course, if he so wished it, Garnet would let him go, albeit reluctantly, but he was too afraid of letting something of his unstable mind slip. It was so easy to do; it confused him no end speaking to two people at the same time. He felt violated in a way he never had before. He could not guard even the most private of thoughts from the intruder inside his head and seemed Murmur could often hear what he was saying to others.

Looking on the bright side, Zidane couldn't complain about being lonely. Murmur spoke to him

without being spoken to half the time, but if the blonde ever wanted company he would only have to call the Terran soul and he would come running (in a sense). Not that the conversation was particularly engaging; all the soul wanted to speak of was Gaia's upcoming doom, replacing vessels and Zidane's dreary fate.

However, overjoyed to be reunited with his love, the thief spent nearly all his time with Garnet, trailing after her like a puppy. She wallowed in his company too, often throwing convention to the wind and flinging her arms about his neck in a most un-royal manner in front of noble audiences. Their love for each other was apparent and could not be denied by anyone. Only hindered, and that was left to Murmur, who generally made a nuisance of himself whenever anyone was around.

However, it wasn't long before Zidane became careless and Garnet, who was carefully and secretly analysing Zidane's mental state alongside Doctor Tot and Blank, picked up on it immediately.

0000

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

“...I mean, sure sure?”

“Yes, Blank! I head him with my own ears!”

The red headed member of Tantalus ran a hand through his hair and sighed, clearly agitated. “You’re ___”

“Don’t make me beat some sense into you with my staff!”

He chuckled humourlessly. “Sorry. It’s just so... unlike him. Sure, he can be pig-headed, impulsive and a little wacky at time but... *talking* to himself?”

Garnet nodded. “I’ve caught him doing it three times now.”

“And he was definitely by himself?”

“Unless there was someone hanging over the edge of my balcony, in the bath with him and in a completely empty bedroom, yes I am one hundred percent positive. Don’t look like that, Blank, I’m as upset as you. This... isn’t the Zidane we know. Something’s wrong... and for some reason he’s not telling us.”

“Perhaps the Iifa Tree injuries affected him psychologically,” Doctor Tot, who had been carefully scrutinising Garnet’s detailed accounts of

Zidane's behaviour, suggested. "It's a major possibility that he suffered some mental trauma as well as physical."

"You're saying he's mad?" Garnet breathed, terrified.

"Not really. But it's not out of the question. This may be his way of dealing with the trauma."

"No," Blank said suddenly. "No. Zidane's stronger than that. You both know it would take something so much bigger than that to affect him."

Garnet agreed sullenly and stared at her lily-white hands. "I just... can't stand seeing him this way. It's just awful... and he won't tell me anything!"

"I bet he'd answer to Baku," Doctor Tot suggested, eyeing Blank.

The redhead sighed. "No. Zidane's stubborn. Once he's made his decision no amount of persuading will make him reconsider... still... there's something not quite right..."

"What do you mean?"

"Well... what did you say you heard him talkin' about on the balcony?"

Garnet twirled a strand of hair around a finger. “Um... he was speaking very quietly, but I think I kept hearing the words ‘murmur’, ‘vessels’ and ‘Terra’. He was probably talking about the ordeal he had to go through when finding out about his true heritage.”

Blank scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Maybe. Or maybe there’s something we don’t know about... How much do you know about Terra?”

“Nothing,” Garnet sighed. “Garland told Zidane everything, but he relayed nothing to us... Oh! Wait a minute! What about Mikoto?”

Doctor Tot raised an eyebrow. “Mikoto?”

“Zidane’s weird sister,” Blank supplied tersely. “They might look similar but they couldn’t be more opposite.”

“She was from Terra,” Garnet explained more gently, sending Blank a warning glance. ‘She knows more about Terra than even Kuja did.’ She gasped suddenly. “What... what if it’s Kuja...?”

There was drawn out, tense silence where distressing memories sifted before their eyes.

“It’s possible...” Garnet continued. “Zidane could hear Kuja and Garland’s voice in his head. It’s how he knew Kuja was alive in the Iifa Tree.”

Blank sighed in frustration. “Let’s not jump to conclusions before we’ve spoken to that unemotional chick. She should know better than anyone.”

“Seems like we don’t have a choice,” Doctor Tot chuckled.

“I can’t leave Zidane,” Garnet told Blank with pleading eyes. “Can you go to the Blank Mage Village and bring her here?”

The thief nodded and absently preformed the Tantalus salute. “No problemo. I’ll report back to boss and use the Red Rose.”

Garnet nodded and the meeting was adjourned.

0000

“All I want is a normal life.”

(you cannot be normal. You are kami. You are gifted. Why do you wish to be without power)

“I just want to be with Garnet...”

(you cannot. Mortal desires are beneath you. You are destined to live among the stars, therefore you must become)

“I won’t become. I’d rather die.”

(then you will)

“Just go away, Murmur.”

(you cannot banish us with mere words. You are our kami not through choice but by birth right. Even when you die, even if we die, you will always be kami)

“I don’t even know what a kami is.”

(you must become, kami)

“I don’t even know how!”

(Garland should have told you this)

“Well he didn’t. He —”

“Zidane? Are you talking to yourself?”

The genome leapt off the ground in alarm, tail bristling. He turned round, scratching the back of his head and laughing a little too loudly.

Some actor, he thought sheepishly.

(you are not an actor. You are -)

Oh gods just SHUT UP!

Garnet, who had slipped through the doors into her chamber more silently than even he, an adept thief, could have done, stared at him with her doe like eyes and his heart melted.

“No,” he lied instantly. “I was singing.”

“Hm. Strange song. What’s it called?”

“Don’t remember.”

“A song without a name? How unusual.”

Is she trying to catch me out? Am I that obvious?
“Our song doesn’t have a name,” he countered swiftly.

She smiled and her eyes sparkled with tears.

“What’s wrong?” he said, shocked.

She shook her thicket of dark hair and melted to him like butter.

“Nothing at all,” she lied instantly.

*Sorry for the short chapter! But please review!
Everything will pretty much be revealed in the next
chapter, but not without reviews!*

4. Mikoto

Chapter Four

M i k o t o

A light, summer rain began sifting from scudding grey clouds as Blank entered the dense forest. His surroundings became alive with a chorus of pitter-patter. Drops slid down leaves and wet the thirsty undergrowth beneath, including Blank.

He sighed and adjusted his bandana just enough so he could peer with distaste at the sopping balcony above. He'd never been one for rain. It seemed the gods were out to spite him, today.

The red head began the long, tiresome journey through the woods. He had mentally logged away the instructions Garnet had given him before departing on how to locate the infamous Black Mage Village. Something to do with owls... flying away, or something. After a few wrong turns he got the gist of it and was soon well on his way to the little village.

He encountered a few enemies, but none were a match for his strength and wit. Despite slicing

through them with minimal effort, he was grateful nonetheless when he spotted a plume of smoke spiralling lazily into the grey sky.

He entered the village, an eyebrow cocked with mild appreciation. How anyone could draw together enough organisation and skill to maintain a prosperous village such as this in the middle of a forest was lost to him. And yet somehow these... mages had succeeded.

A genome appeared from a house, and for a disorientating moment he thought it was Zidane. But no. This one's face was too narrow, his eyes too far apart and the hair a lighter shade of blonde. The difference was subtle, but Blank could easily pick his Tantalus brother from a crowd.

The genome stared at Blank with a slight dash of curiosity settling hesitantly upon his features. He approached him, unperturbed by the rain, it seemed, and nodded in greeting.

"Um hi," Blank began slowly. "Mikoto around? I got a message for her. From Zidane."

For a second the red head thought the genome would not respond, but then he nodded slowly and

said, “Ah, Zidane. Yes. Mikoto is by the inn.” A pause. “Do you know where that is?”

Blank shook his head.

“It is by the moving waters,” the genome explained vaguely. “The waters that run beneath the wooden street that stands on sticks.”

Blank blinked. “You mean a bridge?”

The genome’s eyes lit up. “Yes. Yes. A bridge. Bridge. I had forgotten, is all. She will be there.”

“Thanks.”

These kids definitely weren’t like Zidane — and thank the gods for it!

He followed the ‘moving waters’ and, true to the genome’s word, found the emotionless chick standing on the bridge, gazing into the churning depths below. Upon spotting Blank, who was soaked to the skin with red hair flattened to his forehead, she raised a nonchalant brow but said nothing.

“Hiya,” the thief greeted warmly. “Alright? Remember me?”

“Vaguely. You were one of the strange ones that collected Zidane from the Iifa Tree, correct?”

She thinks I'm strange? “Err... yeah. Listen, Garnet sent me here to —”

“You want to talk about Zidane,” she intervened smoothly.

“Yeah. He’s been —”

“Acting most strangely. Showing symptoms of madness.”

“Yeah... how do you —”

“Know? I knew this day would come as soon as Garland died.”

“Oh. Will you —”

“Go with you? I suppose I better.”

“Actually,” Blank said. ‘I was going to say ‘will you let me finish a goddamn sentence, woman’... but I guess you like cracking down to business.’ He winked and said: “My kinda woman!” But the joke was lost to the oblivious Mikoto.

The genome in question sighed, straightened her pink shirt and brushed away strands of sunshine-blond hair, then nodded. “We should go, before it’s too late. I doubt I’ll be able to stop him, but at least I can warn others.”

“Warn? What are you talking about?”

She closed the gap between them and Blank took a nervous step back. Clearly this deranged bird hadn’t a clue of what the term ‘personal space’ meant.

“It is best,” she said, “that I tell you altogether. It’s a long story.”

Xxx

Garnet, looking ethereal in a mauve dress and pearl tiara, leaned back into the leather chair, trying to absorb the information.

“Terran souls?” she repeated disbelievingly.

Mikoto nodded. “They’ve approached me, on occasion, more out of curiosity than anything. But I am of little use to them. Garland made me to take Zidane’s place if he died on his mission to destroy Gaia. My powers are dormant until then, and the Terran souls know it.”

Garnet nodded slowly. “So... what you’re telling me is that... after Garland died and the Iifa tree was destroyed, the self proclaimed ‘leader’ of the souls is... ordering Zidane to continue the annihilation process?”

“That’s right,” Mikoto confirmed gravely. “I’m not exactly sure how, though.”

“Yeah, what with the Iifa Tree capice,” Blank agreed. “But this soul must know a way.”

“They need new vessels,” Garnet said, clicking her fingers. “You said to me once that the genome’s had all developed souls, right? So, the Terran souls probably want Zidane to get them new vessels!”

Mikoto played with the arm of her chair, picking at the intricate woodwork. “Undoubtedly. But how they plan on getting them is beyond me. They’d need people without souls, and as far as I know Gaia is lacking that particular ingredient.”

“Well, what about what Kuja did?” Garnet said. “You know... he made his own army of soulless mages. Maybe they want Zidane to do the same?”

“Nah,” Blank said. “I’m sure they’ve figured out by now that Zidane’s a tough nut to crack. There’s no way they’re gonna convince him to repeat what Kuja did.”

“You’re right,” Garnet agreed. “He’d never do it.”

A silence enveloped them as they wracked their brains trying to conjure an answer to their riddle. Maids came with refreshments but all were too distracted to drink, let alone eat. The room in which they sat was lined with dusty, leatherback books, and a fire crackled beneath an extravagant mantel. Blank approached this and threw a log on, almost absently.

“What’s it like?” Garnet asked suddenly. “I mean, how is it that the souls are able to communicate with you and Zidane?”

“We are Garland’s angels of death,” Mikoto answered in monotone. “Telepathy was a unique Terran faculty that Garland installed within the genomes too. It seems the souls have not lost that ability.”

“Would explain why he’s talkin’ to himself,” Blank said.

“He’s speaking to the souls!” Garnet balled her hands into fists. “They’re telling him to get vessels! Oh, Zid, why didn’t you say anything?”

Blank sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “You know him. Too gods damn courageous to trouble anyone with his problems. Probably thinks he can sort it out himself.”

“What should we do?” Garnet cried despairingly. “Surely the constant onslaught of voices will drive him mad?”

“It will,” Mikoto said. “Undoubtedly. But there’s nothing we can do. Now the souls are awake they will not rest until they can live again.”

“No! There must be a way!”

“There is not.”

“Mikoto, please, you must know something! We have to do something to save him,” Garnet pleaded. “There must be a way to send them back to sleep, to kill them, even give them what they want!”

“If they get what they want then Gaia will become Terra,” Mikoto said sharply. “Garland’s plan will be realized, and Zidane will become his angel of death.”

Garnet sank further into her chair, defeated, thinking of her love’s slipping sanity.

“You’re driving me insane.”

(you are so stubborn, kami)

“So are you.”

(you will change your mind)

“Never.”

(we will make you)

“Never.”

(you cannot abandon your people)

“You’re not my people. You’re Terrans.”

(you are Terran)

“I am Gaian.”

(no)

It was impossible for him to sleep with Murmur whispering in his head. Within the last few days Zidane’s mind was constantly abuzz with the soul’s urges, desires and protests. Nothing he said would make Murmur leave, and Zidane was tired, mentally and physically. His arguing was all but futile and his resistance was wearing thin. He had found himself, on occasion, actually considering ways to get them vessels, just so he could have a piece of mind. *His mind.*

“Let me sleep.”

(you sleep too much. Garland should have created you minus these faults)

“Everyone needs sleep.”

(I should have been in charge of the genome programme)

Zidane’s grin was wide beneath the white sheets of his bed. “Oh ho? What’s this? A trace of bitterness in your voice, Murmur? An actual trace of a bloody personality? Dear gods, don’t stop on my behalf, please! Anything’s better than your constant arguing.”

(you are the one arguing, kami, not I)

“Whatever.”

Realising he was going to get little sleep with Murmur’s incessant ramblings echoing in his mind, Zidane got out of bed, dressed, and went in search of Garnet, of whom he had seen little the past few days.

He had been hurt to find that she slept in a separate bed to him. Upon discovering this, he had begged her to consider otherwise, swore on his Tantalus honour (‘even thieves have honour,’ he protested when she questioned this) that he would keep his hands to himself because being close to her

was enough (though being close to her drove him wild) and he would keep every item of clothing on if she wanted it.

But alas, she would have none of it. She blushed violently and had the servants prepare his bed in a room adjacent to hers which, oh joys of joys, left him alone with Murmur day *and* night.

Zidane strode down the endless hallways, stopping to inquire of Garnet's whereabouts now and then, and eventually located where she was.

(any of these Gaian's will do, kami), Murmur whispered in his mind.

What? But they've all got souls!

(that doesn't matter)

That's not what you've been bloody telling me the last few days! If I doesn't matter then why don't you just take them?

(you misunderstand, kami. they must be cleansed)

Cleansed?

(by you)

Damn you, Murmur. Speak in fucking Gaian for once!

(listen well, kami. I shall tell you how to get us vessels. you must-)

“Zidane!”

Torn from his (and Murmur’s) thoughts, Zidane looked down a narrow stairwell and spotted not only Garnet, but Blank and Mikoto, seated in Queen Brahne’s private library.

“Hey guys,” he shouted down. “What are y’all doin’ in here?”

He was genuinely vexed. His Tantalus brother, his love and his sister in a room that was barely used. Their awkward pause and downcast expressions did nothing to quell his suspicious unease.

“Mikoto’s visiting,” Garnet said. “I sent one of the servants up to wake you... did they not come?”

Zidane shook his head, settling in a spare chair. He was no fool, clearly this assembly had something to do with him. The awkwardness hung in the air as obvious as Mist.

“Na, I guess I was snoring too loudly.”

“I’ll second that,” Blank remarked.

Zidane’s eyes rested on his sister, who returned his stare openly.

“Hi there, Mikoto,” he chirped. “Long time no see, how’ve you been?”

(the third angel. She is useless to us for she -)

Not now!

“I am well.”

“Good, good.”

Do you... think she knows about the souls being awake?

(yes)

Damn. Does she know about you speaking to me?

(No. But it is highly probable that that it the reason why she is here. She is no use to us because she does not have -)

I know, I know. Shit. I guess she’s told them.

(Highly likely though it is irrelevant to who knows. Soon all of Gaia will succumb to Terra’s red light)

Geez, give it a rest would ya?

Suddenly realising that he must have been strangely silent for some time, Zidane yawned and stretched dramatically. “Man, I’m still pretty tired. Gotta stop takin’ those daytime naps.”

An uncomfortable pause. Zidane resisted the urge to scream out his problems to the world; it was clear they already knew. But for some reason... he held it back.

Blank started light conversation that Zidane picked up easily. Improvisation. Acting.

Garnet stared between the two in bemusement. She felt so frustrated, she wanted to scream and shout at Zidane for being so selfish, to beg him just to tell her everything. She wanted to make

everything go away for him, after everything he’d been through she just wanted him to be happy. No matter the cost. He deserved that more than anyone.

Subconsciously, Garnet’s hand strayed to her chest and clutched empty air; the place where her pendant once hung. It was both a physical and emotional emptiness that weighed on her heart and mind despite Zidane’s return. Her pendant was once both a negative and positive manifestation of her

personality, and despite being glad that she had finally parted with it, she missed the old summoning jewel's comforting weight sorely.

Summoning jewel.

Summoning.

Garnet's eyes were wide as a possible realisation dawned. She gripped air with one hand, the chair arm with the other and took a sharp intake of breath.

Was it possible? Even if it was, could she do it? Would she gain anything from it?

Garnet abruptly stood and excused herself from the room, oblivious to the curious looks following her wake. She glided up the stairwell but once out of sight all dignity was lost. She raised the hem of her lilac dress and ran as fast as her dainty shoes would let her to the main library.

The corner she sought after was dusty and dark, despite the meticulous upkeep of the library. The books there were heavy, crumbling things, with pages stained by time and leather backs worn away and clinging with an increasingly tenuous grip to the spine.

Garnet dropped to her knees, distractedly pushing her braided hair behind her shoulders. She scanned the bookshelf frantically and sighed in relief when she spotted the one she wanted. She had feared the librarians would have discarded it due to its withered state; it could be older than Alexandria itself.

Carefully, she slid the old book from its perch and blew dust from the cover. After checking she was alone, she gently peeled open the front and ran a fingernail along the list of contents.

There it was, just like she'd remembered.

Garnet smiled to herself, suddenly feeling not so helpless, and read the chapter title with delight.

‘The Summoning Of Spirits’

Later that day, when the sky was tinged purple around the edges and the first stars winked in its midst, Zidane joined his sister on the turret of the castle.

He had found her by accident as he ascended the tower in an attempt to clear his head, but he was suddenly glad for company other than Murmur, and glad to get Mikoto alone.

“Hey, Mik,” he greeted warmly, and stood beside her.

She was leaning somewhat precariously over the edge, staring expressionlessly down at the dizzying drop. She did not return his greeting but simply stated: “There are souls in your mind.”

Zidane leaned against the cool stone, arms crossed, leg propped against the wall, and stared at the flags, lying limp in the breezeless night. He recalled with faint fondness the night he and Garnet had leapt from this tower, holding onto the string of flags for dear life. How long ago it all seemed now.

“Yeah,” he replied finally. “I guessed you’d know.”

“They came to me too, briefly,” she told him. “But I am of no use to them. It’s you they want, Zidane.”

“I figured.”

“What do they want?”

“You don’t know?”

“...I have an idea.”

“Go on.”

“They... they want vessels, correct?”

“Bingo.”

“But there aren’t any.”

“Right again!”

“So they need you to get some.”

“You’re good at this.”

Mikoto turned to give him a long, steady stare.
“You’re not taking this seriously, Zidane.”

He huffed and returned her gaze. “Sorry. It’s just... sometimes I feel like... I’m going mad, y’know? It’s tough having voices in your head and trying to... keep it from the people you love.”

“They know.”

He scratched the back of his head. “Damn.”

“How do they want you to get the vessels?”
Mikoto asked.

He shrugged. “Dunno. They just keep telling’ me over and over to get ‘em. Said I’ve got to become the ‘reaper’ or something.”

Mikoto stared at the horizon, painted a vibrant orange by the setting sun. “Sounds ominous. I’ll ponder it.”

“Thanks,” Zidane drawled, a little sarcastically. Then something occurred to him, and he recalled his time in Oeilvert, where he encountered a language only he could read. “Hey, Mik. Did Terra have its own language?”

Mikoto raised an eyebrow. “Yes. You should know that. It is what you and I communicate in when we speak telepathically.”

Zidane grinned. “Didn’t realise. So um... they have different terms from us — er — Gaian’s, right?”

“Yes.”

“What does ‘kami’ mean?”

Mikoto turned to look at him, her face a mask of shifting shadows in the dying light. “Why do you want to know that?”

“It’s... it’s what the souls have been calling me...”

Mikoto’s expression altered slightly. “Zidane,” she said. “They’ve been calling you ‘God.’”

please review

5. Call The Dead

Thank you so much for the support, I'm really enjoying writing this fic. And for those of you awaiting the final chapter of Driftwood, I'm halfway through!

Chapter Five C a l l . t h e . d e a d

It was night when Eiko arrived.

The Hilda Garde docked smoothly beside the Red Rose, the propellers droning to a stop, and Alexandrians scurried about its bulking form fastening the massive chains to the docking yard. A gang plank was lowered, meeting the side with a dull *thunk*, and a red carpet unfurled along its length like a velvet tongue.

Eiko Carol bounded down the carpet, almost tumbling head over heels, and skidded to a stop before an Alexandrian Guard.

“You there,” she said, “where’s Dagger? I’m here to see her right away!”

The guard eyed her with apparent distaste. “Her Royal Highness is in the castle. Who might you be?”

“Me? I’m Eiko, Regent Cid’s daughter.”

“Regent Cid has no daughter,” the guard replied snootily. “Away with you, urchin.”

“Urchin!?” Eiko cried, aghast. “H-how dare you! Why I outta—”

“Eiko, dear,” a voice called from the gangway. “Mind your manners. The guard is only doing his job.”

Hilda Garde drifted down the plank with all the grace of swan and stared at her newly adopted daughter with mild disdain. Her blond curls were fastened to her head with clusters of pearls and her lilac dress swooned about her ankles in a most hypnotic fashion as she walked.

“Sorry, mother,” Eiko said. “It’s just that this man doesn’t even know who I am! Anyway, we’re in a hurry! Dagger said it was urgent! And she requested to see me personally!”

“Is this true, your Ladyship?” the guard inquired.

Hilda smiled and nodded. “Most correct. Would you be so kind as to escort us to the castle? We must

make haste.”

The guard bowed deeply and cast Eiko a fleeting, confused look before leading them to Alexandria Castle.

They were greeted by General Beatrix who smiled warmly at Eiko and bowed respectfully to Hilda.

“Please excuse my haste,” she said, “But the queen wants Lady Eiko to go to her immediately. You are welcome to wander as you please around the castle, my lady, and there is a guest room set up for your leisure.”

“Thank you, Beatrix,” Hilda returned. “I know my way round the castle, I shall be quite at home.”

Beatrix preformed a sweeping bow. “As is your wish, Lady Hilda.” She turned to Eiko. “Come then, quickly now, the Queen has been waiting for you.”

Eiko skipped merrily after the general. When she had received a telegram from Garnet requesting her presence she was ecstatic; when she read that she must attend immediately for it was matter of the utmost urgency, she was ecstatic and excited. Zidane had only been back a month or so and already a potential adventure was amiss!

Beatrix led Eiko to a room she had never seen before. It was situated inside the West Tower, down a flight of stairs usually hidden by padlocked doors. The steps were smooth with age and the walls were damp. It smelt of age.

The stairs opened out to a thick, wooden door reinforced with steel bars. Beatrix pushed the door aside and Eiko gasped at the contents within.

The room was completely circular and filled with candles, or casting their disjointed dancing light. There must have been a hundred of them, Eiko guessed. They hung from the ceiling, flickered on the floor and perched on the endless shelves lining the room, which also held bottles too many to count. These containers held within them liquids of all colour: green, blue, yellow, pink, red, orange, black. Some contained preserved parts of animals and monsters, pickled amphibians and eyeballs and tongues and claws and wings.

In the centre of all this organised chaos sat Garnet. She wore a scarlet dress of heavy velvet, which spilled around her slight form like blood. Her hair was bound in a series of complex plaits, kept from her shoulder and fastened to her head by gold threads. She smiled warmly as Eiko entered, and

with he face free of hair and her eyes black and gold with candlelight, Eiko could see why Zidane fell in love with her.

“Eiko!” she said. “I’m so glad you could come! I was worried you wouldn’t make it with such short notice...”

Eiko shook her mane of purple hair. “Naw, I convince father to let me borrow the Hilda Garde. Mother refused to let me go alone, she said it was too dangerous. Obviously she’s forgotten that I helped fight Kuja once and lived with moogles in city of ruins!”

“Obviously.” Garnet smiled. She was so fond of Eiko. She cast her eyes on Beatrix. “Thank you for bringing her here. You may leave now, Beatirx.”

The general hesitated for only an instant, then bowed and departed. Her heart hammered furiously in her chest and butterflies fluttered in her abdomen. This was wrong, but she was in no position to question her queen.

The heavy, wooden door swung closed.

“What is this place?” the purple haired girl asked. “It’s weird.”

“Yes, it is. It’s one of the oldest rooms in the castle. It’s said that the old summoners who came to my kingdom with Alexander worked here, hence the... assortment of potions. It’s all very old. Father wouldn’t let mother destroy the contents and eventually she forgot about it. Most people don’t even know it exists.”

The candles flickered.

“So,” Eiko began, “you didn’t say what it was you wanted in the telegram. Sounded serious though.”

“It is,” Garnet replied. “Sit down and I’ll tell you everything.”

Eiko did as she was told and listened as Garnet relayed to her Zidane’s behaviour over the weeks gone, and why that was. She had difficulty taking it all in, and she partly blamed that on the heavy incense burning all around, intoxicating the atmosphere with its heady scent.

“I can’t believe it!” she cried, when Garnet had finished. “Those scumbags! How dare they! How dare they do this to Zidane! What are we going to do?”

Garnet touched the empty space where her pendant used to be. “Well, when Mikoto was talking about the souls and spirits, I remembered a book I once found in the library when I was young. It was a book on summoning.”

“Ooh, that’s unusual! Don’t get many books ’bout summoning nowadays! Must be old.”

“It is.” Garnet reached behind her and brought forth the crumbling book. “Look.”

Eiko did as she was told and marvelled at the age of the manuscript. It contained various instructions and tips when summoning, and the history of the Eidolons and their natures.

“Amazing,” she said. “But what’s this got to do with Terra and Zidane?”

Garnet smiled. “Turn to page one hundred and twelve.”

Eiko flicked to that page and gasped. “‘How To Summon Spirits’... you’re not thinking...?”

“Yes,” she said, her expression turning grave. “I’m going to try and summon one of the Terran spirits and stop them once and for all.”

Xxx

Eiko bit her lip and stared at the pages of the book.

“You sure that’s a good idea? You don’t know what you’re dealing with, and you’ve never even felt the presence of a Terran soul... you might end up summoning something... something you shouldn’t, you know? Something from the underworld. You could get hurt...”

Garnet shook her head. “I don’t care. It’s worth it, if it means helping Zidane.”

“But... but... he wouldn’t want you to do this! He —”

“Wont ask for help. You know what he’s like, Eiko.” She sighed. “They’re driving him insane. Everyday I see him get worse and worse. I can’t stand it, I’ve only just got him back!”

Eiko fumbled with the pages.

“But...” Garnet continued. “I don’t know much about this sort of summoning. I need your help. Will you?”

The seven year old scanned the pages of the summoning spell. It was not unlike a cookery book, she realised, and then immediately thought, it wasn’t

like any other summoning spell she'd seen. It required ingredients, careful planning, perhaps weeks of mental training...

"We can't do it tonight," she said. "It's too dangerous, and besides, there's so much prep."

"No! We have to!" the queen cried. "Zidane needs help now! Who knows what they're trying to make him do! I hate to think about it... Please... if anything goes wrong I'll abandon the spell immediately, I promise."

Eiko stared at the spell doubtfully, then at Garnet, and back.

"For Zidane?" the brunette tried.

Eiko sighed. "Okay. For Zidane. Let's get started."

Cid's daughter went about locating and mixing ingredients into a dusty cauldron she found in a cupboard, which was easier said than done, for the labels on the jars were worn and often illegible. The ingredients were obscure, but few in quantity, so Eiko was able to locate or improvise. While she did this, Garnet drew a circle in the centre of the room with a chip of chalk. Inside she drew a star, its points touching the lip of the circle. Then, using the book,

she copied strange letters around the circumference. Eiko told her it was an ancient, dead language used long before Maidan Sari even existed.

When it was done, Eiko carefully emptied the contents of the cauldron over the symbols Garnet had drawn, then told Garnet to sit in the centre of drawing. She crouched in front of her and drew more symbols with the mixture onto Garnet's forehead, cheeks, palms and feet. It smelt so bad Garnet decided not to ask what was in it.

Finally, Eiko announced everything was ready and garnet felt a flush of nervous anticipation. The room was eerily silent and the candlelight made the shadows dance like demons. The incense left her breathless.

“Now listen carefully,” Eiko said, her little voice sounding mature and impossibly grave. “You must keep your guard at all times. The spirits may be resentful to you for having something they do not: a body. They may attack you and try to possess you. Don't let it happen so stay alert and don't succumb to any of their tricks. Do you know the name of spirit you want?”

Garnet nodded. “I think his name is Murmur.”

“Good. Now any old spirit can’t come along and talk to you. After repeating the incantation you must speak Murmur’s name, and if everything’s right he’ll come to you.”

“Will I see him?” Garnet asked, suddenly frightened as her mind conjured hideous images of rotting corpses reaching out to her with maggot infested hands.

“Yes,” Eiko said. “But he won’t be able to touch you, nor will he be able to leave the circle.”

“Will I be able to?”

“Yeah but that’d end the spell and dismiss the spirit, so do that if... y’know, anything goes wrong. But don’t worry, I’m here, and I can end the spell with a single word if it gets out of hand.” Eiko took a deep breath and nearly choked on the smell of the mixture and incense. “Ready?”

Garnet kept her thoughts full of Zidane. “Yes I’m ready. Go ahead.”

Eiko read a line in the language of the ancients and Garnet repeated. She read again and Garnet repeated. Eiko’s voice rose and Garnet’s mirrored her and the chant sped up and up and became louder and louder until their voices merged as one and

Garnet thought she could hear whispering *whispering* on the edges of her mind see flickering in the corners of her vision and still the chant rose and rose and *rose* —

There was a gust of wind in the enclosed room and the candles were snuffed out, bathing them in darkness.

Garnet said: “Murmur.”

Xxx

“Murmur?”

(yes)

“Why do you call me god?”

The stars were not beautiful or romantic that night. They were cold lumps of steel dumped in an ominous darkness. Zidane had never thought of stars as such, and it upset him that he would think this now. He blamed it on his state of mind.

(because you are)

“I’m far from a god. Gods are perfect.”

Murmur emitted a disturbing chuckle. *(nothing is perfect. Not you. Not I. Not gods)*

“Why do you call me god?” he asked again, fiddling with the ivy crawling along the side of the balcony.

(you... will bring us salvation. You will possess the power to bring death... and life. All at your whim. You will live forever as the god of New Terra)

Goosebumps raised their backs on his arms and nape and he whispered: “Never.”

Again, the disconcerting chuckle. *(you will. Soon. Generations of Terrans shall address you as kami, for that is what you are, what you will be. Do not be afraid, kami, I will be at your side, guiding you)*

Zidane wanted to scream and fleetingly thought of throwing himself off the balcony. Stop the echoes in his mind, the thoughts of death that plagued him like swarms of angry bees. Buzzing buzzing buzzing in his head. He released a strangled sob.

“Please,” he whispered. “Please just leave me alone. I can’t be what you want me to be.”

(you can. You will)

“Please... please leave...”

(kami)

“GO AWAY!”

Zidane paused, awaiting the inevitable response.

Silence.

He probed the depths of his mind experimentally, tentatively seeking Murmur’s presence.

His azure eyes opened wide and he stared up at the stars.

“M-Murmur?”

Xxx

“Murmur?”

The shadows shifted like bodiless, black entities. Garnet would not be able to see Eiko even if she were looking, so dark the chamber was.

Her eyes were fixed on the only thing visible.

“Murmur?” Garnet tried again.

The light before her was strange. It did not illuminate its surroundings but clearly shone with some iridescent spark. As Garnet spoke it shifted, morphed, transformed and eventually Murmur made himself apparent.

And so did Garnet's mistaken presumption.

Murmur was no man.

She was dark and sinister but painfully, exotically beautiful. Black locks were scraped away from a flawless face by a band of diamonds that sparkled in a manner that was somehow surreal in the imposing darkness. Her unbound hair was sword straight, and brushed against her lower back. Her curves were sparsely hidden beneath a silver shift that seemed as insubstantial as moonlight, moving like Mist around her body. Her eyes were feline, cunning and chips of obsidian; lips like a blossom of freshly drawn blood against pale skin. Her smile drained any warmth from her expression.

If she was surprised she betrayed no sign and Garnet was stunned by her unearthly beauty.

Yet the words that slid like silk from her lips dispelled any hope that her personality would reflect her outer appearance.

"Dirty, meddling wench," Murmur snarled in a voice that was luscious yet strangely disjointed. "If I were with body I would cut your throat with my nails and tear your tongue from your mouth with my teeth."

Garnet swallowed. "Are you Murmur?"

The soul sneered, revealing pearl teeth that were clenched together in an animalistic fashion. "Whore. Slug. How dare you summon me, despicable rodent. I am not like your precious Eidolons. I will kill you the instant kami gives me a vessel."

"Kami?" Garnet pressed, ignoring the insults. "Who is kami?"

Murmur laughed maliciously and tossed her thicket of dark hair. "You know nothing, Gaian. You are nothing to me, nothing to him. He will be the death of you, lowly pig."

"Him? You mean Zidane?"

"He goes by that name too," Murmur replied matter-of-factly. "But that is of little consequence. Release me, filthy dog."

Garnet stiffened and mustered her resolve. "No! Not until you answer me! I want some questions answered and you'll answer them!"

"Or what?" Murmur sneered, distorting her perfect features. "I will answer nothing."

"You need vessels, right?" Garnet said, ignoring her. "What must Zidane do to get them?"

Murmur's face darkened and became a sinister mask of ambition and hate. "He will *become*..."

"Become? Become what?"

The sneer deepened. "He will become... *god*. He will become what Garland desired." Murmur took a step forward though no footstep sounded. She closed the gap between herself and Garnet and the queen felt an odd tugging at the corners of her mind. She fought it off hesitantly. "He will become what *I* desire. What Terra desires. He will become... the reaper."

Face to face, Garnet stared deep into Murmur black eyes. "'The reaper?' What does that mean?"

The tugging grew sharper and the room spun slightly. Garnet heard Eiko take a sharp intake of breath.

"Maybe... you will be of some use, girl."

Garnet took a nervous step back, aware of the edge of the circle inches from her heel. "What?"

The tugging reached a painful height and Murmur's grin widened. "Zidane will be *mine*."

"Dagger get out of there!"

Murmur lurched forward the same time Garnet leapt back. An incredible force shook the queen from head to toe and for an instant her mind felt fit to burst. She closed her eyes and cried out toppling to the stone floor and away from the circle. She heard Eiko cry out, heard jars smash and her thoughts flew to Zidane.

Lying on the cold floor, she opened her eyes and found Murmur gone.

Almost gone...

6. Between Three People

*Thank you very much for patience everyone.
Here's the next chapter.*

Chapter Six

B e t w e e n . T h r e e . P e o p l e

“Dagger! You okay?”

The voice seemed far away, brushing slightly against her senses. It could've been mistaken as nothing but a thought. An echo of a memory. Perhaps she wasn't hearing it at all.

“Dagger! Say something! Dagger!”

Louder. Calling.

Garnet groaned and the world spun into focus.

“Dagger! You okay?”

Eiko's face blossomed into view, a mask of worry. Garnet sat up and put her head in her hands.

“I... don't know,” she replied. “I feel... kinda funny.”

Her senses were tingling, colours seemed starker, noises strident. Her head throbbed dully, like the passing of a headache. But it was unfamiliar and disquieting. It felt... it felt like something... *someone* had burrowed beneath the layer of her consciousness and embedded itself there, like a parasite. The sensation was not dissimilar to the Eidolons, but their presence had always been a comfort, a welcome. This presence was... was...

“Geez, you gave me such a scare!” Eiko shouted. “That nasty old hag! How dare she speak of Zidane like that! As if... as if he was *hers*!”

Garnet smiled. “If I recall, you weren’t much different when it came to possessiveness, Eiko.”

The little girl pouted then jumped to her feet. “Well, at least it wasn’t a complete waste of time. We found out who Murmur is and what she wants: for Terra’s lost souls to find vessels.”

Garnet sighed and found her feet. She brushed dust from her crimson dress and despondently noted the streaks of grime arching across the front like soiled rainbows. “You’re right. And Zidane’s the only one left capable of following Garland’s old plan. Though we still didn’t discover exactly *how* Zidane is going to acquire those vessels.”

“Mmm.” Eiko tapped her upper lip. “She said something about Zidane being ‘the reaper’... whatever that means. Shall I start lookin’ through the library for clues?”

Her thoughts pieced back together, Garnet nodded and unlocked the wooden door, desperate for sunlight and to be in Zidane’s arms. “Get Mikoto to help too. She knows more about the history of Terra than anyone. You never know, we might come up with something yet.” She paused. “I’m going to talk to Zidane.”

As it happened, Zidane found her first, his face that of a man released from years spent in prison: elated, eager yet understandably apprehensive.

“Dagger!” he cried, lightly gripping her arms. “You okay?”

She blinked. Seeing Zidane made her thoughts go fuzzy, and not in the warm, love-struck sense, either. Panic began to rise like a river in a rainstorm.

“I’m fine,” she managed. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

He sighed, relief evident. “Mikoto told you about the souls speaking to me, right? Well, they’re gone! One minute I was talking to Murmur and the next...” He shrugged.

Garnet bit her lip. Was that a good sign?

“What?” he said, noting her expression.

“Nothing!” she lied, and grinned. “I’m just so happy they’re gone!”

“Me too. It’s just I’m a little worried... might... Mik... be...”

Garnet frowned. “Pardon? I didn’t catch that.”

“You... she... kn... ine...”

Zidane’s voice faded in and out of ear shot. His mouth worked silently for several seconds and Garnet gasped. The river burst its banks. A sharp pain eroded the rest of her senses and suddenly her thoughts were unreachable, plucked from grasp and thrust aside. But by who? She couldn’t think.

Panicky, Garnet raised a hand to her throbbing temple.

Zidane frowned and gripped her arms tighter. “Kay... ook... rong...”

His voice faded completely and Garnet collapsed upon the velvet carpet beneath her. The room shivered then faded into an unsettling blackness.

Zidane grabbed a passing servant and ordered for Doctor Tot to be brought immediately. When he returned his attentions to Garnet she was sitting up, supporting herself with a trembling arm. Her hand fluttered across her eyes, as if trying to rid a terrible image.

“You alright?” he asked, crouching beside her. “What was all that about?”

Garnet, looking calmer and in control now, turned her gaze to him and offered a watery smile. “I have no idea. I think everything’s just getting too much.”

Zidane helped her to her feet, anxiety nipping his senses. But it wasn’t just angst. Something was setting off a deep-rooted, primitive aspect of his brain (something perhaps Garland installed) and it set his nerve endings on fire with a profound yet seemingly unreasonable suspicion.

Something.

Something.

Her voice? Her eyes? Her posture? Expression? The way she looked at him. *The way she looked at him.* Different.

He shook his head.

Nonsense. Nothing was wrong. It was *he* that had problems and obviously they were effecting the way he viewed everyday circumstance. Perhaps he was tired.

As if reading his thoughts, Garnet turned her attentions to him once more and proposed: “Shall we retreat back to our chamber?”

Zidane smiled, completely missing the altered pronoun. ‘My’ had become ‘our.’ “Yeah, I think I need a lay down or something.”

“As do I,” she agreed and took his hand, entwining her elongated fingers through his gloved ones, a gesture novel to the couple. Before, it had seemed too average, too common. As if their love hadn’t needed such meaningless gestures to express their feelings. Yet this one simple action warmed him to the core and he squeezed her hand lovingly in return.

He was so encompassed in his love that he failed to notice the way she drew back slightly, almost as if she was letting him lead her down the corridors of the castle. Almost as if she didn’t know the way.

0000

Adelbert Steiner trotted down the hallways. He was executing the routine check on the castle and its grounds, which he usually performed with vigour, but tonight his thoughts were far away, obscuring his devotion to duty like a storm cloud cloaks the sun.

In fact, his very thoughts could be likened to a storm cloud; thundery and violent and electric. As personal bodyguard and captain to the queen, she was normally at the forefront of his thoughts anyway, but today, she was particularly patent.

There'd been trouble afoot ever since Zidane's miraculous return. He'd heard rumours of the thief's slipping sanity and witnessed Garnet's deteriorating health correlate this. It was alarming, and for once Steiner felt unable to assist.

"Captain, you just walked straight past two of your useless Pluto Knights fishing in the canal," a rich voice chided behind him.

Steiner turned round, eyes wide, and stared stupidly at General Beatrix.

The General in question tossed her curls in an almost exasperated manner and fingered the hilt of her sword distractedly, almost restlessly, which was a trait foreign to her. "I suppose I'm no better," she

went on. “They’ve been doing it for an hour, apparently, and I’ve only just noticed...”

“Beatrix...”

“Awful, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“Everything.”

Steiner shifted and his armour cluttered like a stack of plates falling over. “I don’t know what to do,” he said, “but I have been relentlessly plagued by an abhorrent feeling since sunrise, and it shows no sign of letting up.”

Beatrix nodded. “I must agree.” She paused. “Would you protest if I suggest a visit to Her Majesty? Just to see how she fairs?”

Steiner nodded and set off toward the Queen’s Chamber, heart pumping ominously.

0000

The curtains weren’t drawn, allowing a beam of silver moonlight to filter through; a patch of pale light upon the carpet. It cast milky luminosity around the Queen’s Chamber, softly revealing the two inhabitants standing beside the giant bed.

Zidane's heart was thumping in his chest. A deep, sickly anticipation pumping through his veins as portent as adrenalin. His limbs felt heavy and his movements languid. He took a laborious step forward and it was like wading through water.

"Zidane," Garnet breathed again, the soft notes of her voice fluttering on the still, nighttime air. "I'm so glad you're alive. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Zidane imagined himself smiling but it didn't quite develop. He could smell her perfume but was bad at naming scents — to him they were categorised into two: bad smells and nice smells — but if anyone asked he would say she smelt like *flowers*.

When they'd entered the room she'd unbraided her hair and now it spilled in gentle velvet-black waves over her chest and spine. The moonlight made her ethereal; eyes pools of darkness and skin lily-white.

"Zidane," she whispered, and pronounced every syllable like she was tasting it. Tasting *him*. Like some new, exotic food.

She opened her arms and he swiftly took up her wordless offer, pressing his body against hers. He ran his hand up her back, losing it in her thicket of hair, and used the other to pull her tight against him, clearly discerning every curve she possessed.

Zidane had been with other girls before but never had he wanted one of them so badly as he wanted Garnet now — had wanted her fervently since his return. He wanted to savour every second — before, during and after — so took a moment to stare into her eyes, but was disappointed to find her face hidden behind a mask of inky shadow.

He was about to ask her to step into the moonlight when suddenly she leaned up and kissed him so hard he could feel teeth behind her lips. The initial shock of her uncharacteristic fervour quickly ebbed away as all the blood and lust shot to his loins and he closed his eyes and kissed her with mirrored ardour.

But as her tongue slid across his bottom lip and forced itself into his mouth, a sudden, unsettling thought sifted into the forefront of his mind — *where did she learn to kiss like this?* — but before he could examine the suggestion it settled back into darkness because she was pulling him onto the bed,

satin sheets rumpling like black waves. She reached for the hem of his shirt and gracefully lifted it over his head — *where did she learn to do that so well?* — and with an air of immense satisfaction ran her nails down his toned chest, drinking him in. He shivered and locked his lips with hers again while expertly removing the bodice of her dress. She moaned slightly, reached for him and playfully tugged the band in his hair out. Ruffled blond locks tumbled over his shoulders.

He drew away for a second to gently nip her neck but when she dug her nails into his back so fiercely it brought a bead of blood to the surface — *I thought she'd want me to be gentle?* — he bit so hard she released a moan that he found difficult to discern between pleasure and pain, but it sent him wild.

When he slid her scarlet dress off (dappled fuchsia in the moonlight) he could barely contain himself so tugged off his breeches too before climbing back onto her. The mask of shadows shrouding her face could no longer conceal the feverish longing in her eyes, and he doubted his own was hardly imperceptible, either.

Face to face now, their breath was hot, sharp and mingled pleasantly, pleasure coming in spiky,

painful bursts as the wanting just continued to mount. Zidane tried to urge himself to calm down but when she parted her legs he could barely contain himself.

Wait. Not yet.

And it was heaven-sent that he did, because the moment Garnet realised he was waiting — willing control over himself — her patience and lust collided and broke and she forgot herself and said: “Kam — Z-Zidane!”

The heat drained from his body. He froze. Eyes were locked in furious, emotional combat.

No. No, gods please please let me of misheard please don't do this it's not right this isn't right —

(Mikoto told you about the souls speaking to me, right? Well, they're gone! One minute I was talking to Murmur and the next...)

But he could tell. Could tell by her startled, caught-in-the-headlights expression that it was true. That she'd made a mistake and unwittingly revealed the truth.

The awful, *awful* truth.

Without a flicker of doubt and in a voice steady and hard, Zidane said: “Murmur.”

It was like he’d cast a spell. The mask of shadows shifted into the unmistakable expression of a sneer, the illusion of Garnet vanishing like mist in morning sunlight, replaced with someone he’d known only in his head.

Murmur grasped Zidane’s hair with a clawed hand and pushed him down until his face was close enough for their noses to touch. She arched her body against his and he felt the tantalising press of her bared breasts, felt the sleekness of her skin and could still taste his lust, sugar on the tip of his tongue.

In a voice that wasn’t Garnet’s, she said: “Hello, kami.”

But he was frozen. Utterly unsure of himself. Never had he been outwitted in such a way as to completely throw him off guard. Murmur had fooled him absolutely and he didn’t know who he hated more for it: himself, or Murmur.

“What have you done with Garnet?” he whispered. “Where is she?”

Murmur sneered, an odd expression on the face of Garnet. “She’s safe. Safe in some place nearby.”

“I don’t understand,” said Zidane. “Show your true self!”

Murmur chuckled. “Why? You seem to be enjoying this body so much.” Her arm reached down abruptly, like a snake striking its prey, and grabbed him between the legs and he yelped, more out of fright than pain.

“Still hard,” she mocked, laughingly. “So what do you want more? Garnet or her body?”

“Shut up! That’s bullshit!” Zidane exclaimed, rolling off her, and feeling his face grow hot.

Murmur sat up, dark hair sliding between bare breasts. She slowly slid a hand across the curve of her thigh and watched Zidane’s eyes helplessly follow its passage. She slowly sat up and leaned forward, trailed a finger along his abdomen, tantalisingly close to the hardness between his legs, and ran her tongue across his lower lip.

He shut his eyes and stifled a moan, desperately trying to rid the image of Garnet from his mind.

“Would you still have me?” Murmur whispered in his ear, trying hard to keep the scorn from her voice. “I think you would. I’d love you more than *she* ever could, kami.”

Zidane’s eyes returned to hers and they flashed with defiant anger. “I love Garnet. Absolutely, completely. And that’s just it; I love everything about her, do you understand?” He shook his head. “Bring her back, Murmur. Bring her back.”

Murmur sat up straight and bared her teeth, another expression alien upon Garnet’s features. “Make me.”

Suddenly an idea popped into her head. She turned the snarl into a grin. “Though you’ve got it all wrong, kami. This isn’t really Garnet’s body. I’m not possessing her. This is just a shell, a vessel. A clone of Garnet. I’m not telling you where she *really* is.”

Zidane’s expression darkened and a predatory sneer crept onto his features, making him look remarkably like Kuja.

Now that’s an expression I could grow to like, thought Murmur.

“You’ve just made a big mistake,” Zidane said. “Now I know that’s not Garnet’s body, to me, you’re just another enemy.”

He slipped to the carpet and absently pulled on his breeches, despondently noting his dagger’s absence. No matter. He’d use his fists!

Without hesitating another second he whirled round and landed a skull-shaking blow to Murmur’s cheek. It knocked her back onto the bed and when she scrambled up — satin sheets hindering speed — he was ready with another, and this time it sent her tumbling gracelessly off the bed.

“Where is she, Murmur?” Zidane yelled, mounting the bed and hopping off the other side. “Tell me or I’ll kill you!”

Murmur glared up at him, sneer still fixed, and spat blood onto the carpet. “No.”

Zidane roared with frustration and gripped Murmur by the neck, lifting her off the ground.

There was something perverse about the whole thing, in Zidane’s opinion. It was like lifting Garnet off the ground by the neck, and he probably wouldn’t have been able to do it if it wasn’t for that gods-awful sneer pasted on her face.

“Tell me!” he shouted, tendons bulging on his arm. “Tell me!”

Murmur was turning a worrying shade of red. “N-no!”

Zidane shook her, tail thrashing. “I’ll kill you! I will, I’ll fucking kill you!”

Suddenly Murmur’s voice changed back to Garnet’s, though her expression did not waver. “No... s-stop, please! Help! Help me! Zidane, please, stop h-help!”

Unnerved, Zidane blinked, too slow to figure that he’d been tricked — again. And suddenly the doors to the chamber were thrown wide, Beatrix and Steiner charging in. Bright light flooded the room, disorientating and blinding, but Zidane didn’t loosen his grip around Murmur’s neck. His relapse cost him essential time to justify himself, and in that time Beatrix and Steiner had assessed the situation and taken action.

A heavy blow to the stomach from Steiner caused Zidane to release Murmur, who tumbled, choking and spitting blood, into Beatrix’s waiting arms. The general then ripped the satin sheets from the bed and encircled Murmur’s naked form from view, while

Steiner grabbed Zidane's right arm, twisted it so far up his back it released an audible crack and pushed him onto the bed.

"You disgusting rodent," Steiner growled, and it was truly terrifying. Gone was the raucous, boisterous, familiar chiding tone he'd used before. Now there was such menace and hate and absolute *disgust* that Zidane lost his voice.

"Take him to the dungeon," Beatrix barked, arm encircling Garnet/Murmur. "He must be detained until further notice. I'll take care of the Queen."

Steiner nodded and before Zidane could even think of a protest he was being marched half naked down the halls of the castle.

Things can only get better, right? PAH! Not in my stories they can't :) Heehee. Attempted murder of the queen CANT be good. Please leave a review so I know that people do actually still want to read this fic! Cheers ;p

7. Silence

Omg, can i just say, that I've spent the last few days drooling over Zidane's Dissidia design. OMG HE LOOKS AMAZING!! So much better than he did in FF9. Tbh, I imagine him looking more like this (chiselled and devious) than the way he does in FF9. If you havent seen it yet (it's amazing!) then go here (you have to add the usual http thing infront of this for it to work):

*images./finalfantasy/images/a/a4/DissidiaZidane.
JPG*

*Or just type 'zidane dissidia' into google images.
SO COOL!!*

Ahem. Secondly, thanks you to everyone who reviewed. Glad people are still readin' this fic :grin: I've practically finished writing it now! And, oh my goodness Xanthera, that's sooo embarrassing lol!! I sat there for ages giggling nervously after reading your review lol! I'm very flattered though hehe. I posted this chap early for you! Have fun at camp ;)

Anyway, enjoy everyone!

Chapter Seven

S i l e n c e

The silence was the worst part. It wasn't an awkward silence. No, not *that* kind of silence (though Zidane fervently wished it was), this silence was a heavy, excruciating thing weighing upon their shoulders like iron armour, moments crawling by at a sluggish rate, where things should have been said but were not. Where there should have been conversation bridging the gulf of that dreadful silence; Zidane should have been justifying and Steiner should have been reprimanding.

But there was nothing to say.

Why?

Because Zidane knew he was in deep shit. He knew the situation wasn't unsolvable (Murmur could make a mistake and reveal her true identity, for instance) but right now the situation looked grim. Zidane chose not to speak because he knew that Steiner wouldn't believe him. Steiner: dutiful and stubborn, believing what his eyes told him, like any true soldier. At that moment Zidane had no doubt that Steiner would only believe what he'd seen, not some watery fairytale-esque story that an ex-thief/actor would spout.

And why wasn't Steiner talking? Zidane didn't really have to guess. He knew. Steiner was mad. Seriously, furiously, undeniably mad. He was shaking. Not just trembling, but *shaking*. Shaking in a way that someone would shake after standing naked in the Ice Cavern for fifteen minutes. But unfortunately for Zidane, he wasn't shaking from exposure to extreme temperature.

Zidane could feel the anger, the disappointment, the shock radiating from Steiner as clear as day. He might as well have been wearing a sign saying: 'I am angry, disappointed and shocked,' it was so blatant.

In other words, for the first time since Zidane could remember, Steiner had been left speechless.

And that's why the silence was awful. The entire trek from Garnet's chamber to the West Tower and down the treacherous flight of stairs to the dungeon, where the walls were streaked with grime, mould and damp, was completed in utter, terrible silence.

When they reached the chamber — a filthy, dank hole where shuffling could be heard but not seen — Zidane turned to Steiner and gave him a long, pleading look. He couldn't find the words, not yet,

but he hoped his expression would tell of his innocence.

But Steiner just returned his plea with a stare that could knock a Grand Dragon off its feet. It was a stare that spoke a thousand words, and not just anger and betrayal, but something twice as awful. There was profound hurt within those depths that frightened Zidane more than any other revealed sentiment. Because the hurt meant Steiner really believed that Zidane had intentionally tried to murder Garnet. He had already decided Zidane was guilty.

Now, chained to a wall with his hands manacled above his head and his feet to the floor (top quality shackles, he perceived with his thief's eye) he pondered upon this. Of course, he didn't blame Beatrix or Steiner. They were doing their job and he knew they'd defend Garnet against anyone, and he respected that. Hell, they even defended her against their queen, Garnet's mother! And what they saw when they entered that room wasn't Garnet possessed by a mad Terran spirit, but a man strangling their beloved queen. Gods, if it had been the other way round Zidane would've killed them both, not imprisoned them!

In that respect, he thought himself lucky.

But what fate awaited him?

Zidane tried to shuffle into a more comfortable position but failed miserably. The ceiling leaked stinking water and the ground was uneven and relentlessly hard. The manacles bit into his flesh. In front of him was a heavy metal door with a tiny, square window in it, which, in turn, let in a tiny square of light, barely enough to asses the rest of his cell.

Steiner had definitely taken him to the worst dungeon chamber in Alexandria.

Zidane tried to think very hard, which was a very difficult thing to do, because now the cold had set in and he was wearing nothing but a pair of breeches. Now he really was shaking from extreme temperature.

He began to list his allies.

Blank would stick up for him! Of course, the whole of Tantalus would. Hell, they'd bust him out of here in a second... if they could...

And Mikoto! Mikoto would explain everything about the Terran souls. She'd figure out that Garnet

was being possessed by Murmur! She was a clever kid, for sure.

Zidane sighed. If Vivi were here he'd stick up for him too...

Vivi.

Zidane's heart ached. Gods, how he wished Vivi was here. Vivi always knew what to do. He was ten times braver and more thoughtful than Zidane ever would be.

The ex-thief stared up at the leaking ceiling and was rewarded with a fat drop of green water splatting against his cheek. He groaned and instinctively tried to wipe it away but the shackles wouldn't allow.

He looked up at them. Even though they were top quality if he'd had some of his thieving gear, picking the lock would only take an hour or so...

But thoughts like that were futile. He was imprisoned here until someone released him or busted him out. Now he had to play the waiting game. A game he wasn't particularly good at.

Zidane's head drooped and the drop of water coursed down his cheek like a tear.

The news spread quickly, like water rippling away from the centre of a disturbance. It spread round the castle first, reaching the ears of Eiko, and then round Alexandria, finding its way to Ruby. Ruby told practically everyone within a thirty mile radius before sending an urgent message via magnet to Lindblum, where Tanatalus found out. It circled Lindblum, moved on to Burmecia, where Freya received the news, and somewhere along the way a traveller passed the news onto Amarant, too. By then the gossip had been twisted into a more sinister parody of its former self, but either way the gist remained and it shocked Zidane's companions to the core. They immediately left for Alexandria.

The group were resembled outside the castle three days later, coming in dribs and drabs. Even Baku, who usually left information-gathering to his underdogs, was there, thick arms crossed over barrel chest, face a mask of fury.

Steiner came out to greet them, expression grim. His hand rested on the hilt of his sword, as if expecting trouble. He eyed Baku with especial caution.

“So, what happened?” Freya asked first. “We’ve all heard the news, exaggerated and manipulated interpretations, I’m sure, but news that travels *that* fast can’t be entirely fictional.”

Steiner kept his distance from the waiting crowd. “I’m afraid what you’ve heard is probably more or less accurate than I’d like to confess. Beatrix and I... Beatrix and I caught the rascalion defiling and strangling the Queen in her own chamber.”

If that moment were a scene acted in a play, now would be the time for ridiculously amplified gasps of disbelief. But this was no play, and thus, only a dreadful silence stretched out before them.

“Y-you’re sure?” Freya said.

Steiner nodded. “If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes I wouldn’t have believed it myself. A rogue and dishonourable thief he may be, but a murderer? I cannot comprehend such a thing. But the bruising on Her Majesty’s face... and the shock she suffers as result of the brutal attack...” He shook his head. “Appalling.”

“GWAHAHAHA!”

The gang jumped at Baku’s unexpected burst of raucous laughter. He slapped his belly and shook his

head.

“If ya believe fer one second that Zidane actually tried to kill his own love, then yer all fools. Every single one of ya. I know that boy better than any of ya, and that rusty hump of metal over there is right about only one thing: Zidane is an idiot. But listen up. He aint no murderer. I aint sayin’ he didn’t do nothin’, either, but he’s got his reasons, an’ I aint gonna stand around listenin’ to a bunch o’ fools squawking and doubtin’ the guy that saved the goddamn planet, ya hear?”

“Right on!” Eiko shrieked. “I never doubted him for a second! Zidane’s a good person! All this Terra stuff... something’s wrong with Garnet, for sure!”

“How dare you question Her Majesty’s innocence!” Steiner yelled, going red in the face. “I saw him strangling her with my own eyes!”

“That may be so,” said Freya, pensively, “but something must have happened. Something more than a domestic argument, I mean. The Zidane we know would never hurt Dagger.”

“Everyone has their dark side,” Amarant chuckled. “Even monkey-boy.”

“You be quiet!” Eiko shrieked. “It’s not his fault! It’s those Terran souls!”

The group turned and looked at her. She quickly explained about the Terran souls invading Zidane’s head and coaxing him into being Garland’s Angel of Death. Then she confessed about her and Garnet’s secret summoning rendezvous, and how they successfully called Murmur’s soul into the realm.

“So it’s possible that something’s happened to Dagger,” she concluded, “and Zidane’s somehow been tricked into murdering her.”

“Nonsense!” Steiner bellowed. “Beatrix and I have been with the queen day and night and she’s perfectly sane! Completely herself! What you suggest is ludicrous at best!”

“No, Steiner, listen!” Freya intervened. “Eiko’s theory may be right! Please, let us talk to Zidane. Let’s see what he has to say about the whole ordeal.”

Steiner shook his head, sadly this time. “I’m afraid I can’t allow that. Her Highness has ordered that no one may see him except the servant that brings him food. I’m following strict orders. He’s under surveillance until his sentence has been decided.”

Again, that awful, heavy silence.

“S-sentence?” Eiko stammered. “What do you mean?”

But Steiner didn’t reply. He turned his armoured back and returned to the bowels of the Castle, wordlessly beckoning them to follow.

0000

Witnessing the injuries Garnet had sustained first hand, it was easy to think Zidane guilty. Her lower jaw and left eye were red and swollen like giant bee-stings, colours ranging from mustard yellow to angry purple. Her inflamed lid almost obscured her eye, and the string of blue and red bruises rimmed her neck like a grotesque necklace.

“Dear Eidolons,” Eiko breathed. “I knew that... I’d heard... but I... I didn’t... I couldn’t...”

“Think he actually had?” Garnet smiled wanly. “The evidence is all here.” And gently touched her inflamed neck.

She was seated on the edge of her bed wrapped in an unflattering cotton slip. Her hair was bedraggled and the circles beneath her eyes were so dark they could have been mistaken for bruising, too.

She'd welcomed them enthusiastically enough, eyes watering and bottom lip trembling. She'd embraced Eiko affectionately then stared around at her other companions with evident sorrow.

"I have no idea what happened," she said. "He was fine one minute and then... he started clutching his head. I asked him if he was okay and he suddenly attacked me, punching me so hard I fell off the bed. Before I could gather my senses he lifted me off the ground by my throat and starting screaming 'I'll kill you, I'll kill you!'"

"That's how we found them," Steiner confirmed. "It's as she says."

Freya turned to the Captain. "But you... didn't hear anything before that? Heard nothing of what she claims commenced before you entered the room?"

Steiner blinked. "Well... no but —"

"What are you saying, Freya?" Garnet whined. "Don't you believe me?" Eyes watering again. "After everything we've been through?"

Freya cast Garnet a long, steady stare. The queen was essentially asking her to chose between her and Zidane. Something wasn't right, she could sense it.

If there was a Terran soul inhabiting her then it was impersonating Garnet's personality almost flawlessly. Freya certainly found herself torn between who to believe.

"I'd feel better after hearing Zidane's side of the story," she decided coldly.

Garnet blinked and for a second — but only a second — Freya thought she saw the mask slip, thought she witnessing a savage, un-Garnet-like hatred and vehemence beneath that scared, vulnerable expression, but then it returned to its previous state so quickly Freya became lost in a tangle of confusion.

"I'm sorry, everyone, but he's just too dangerous to talk to. He became destructive after Steiner locked him up, and you know how unearthly his strength is; he's had to be restrained for his own safety as much as ours. Not only that, but he's so deranged he can barely string a sentence together. So, even if I did let you see him, any attempt to extract decent conversation from him would be futile."

"How convenient," Amarant snorted.

Garnet rounded on him, mask slipping and returning in a heartbeat. Her eyes watered. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! I just don’t know what to do! I can’t bear to see him like this. I just got him back and this happens and... and...” Tears spilled down her bruised cheeks.

Freya sighed and put an arm around her, her doubt fleeing toward Zidane once again. She was positive he hadn’t attacked Garnet out of spite. Maybe he truly had lost his mind. Maybe the Terran souls had won their battle in that respect.

“Don’t worry, Dagger!” Eiko boomed. “I’m sure Zidane will return to normal in no time! I’m sure everything was just a big, fat, stupid accident! Until then, I’m gonna stay here and keep you company until you get better!”

Garnet smiled warmly. “Thank you, Eiko.”

“I’ll linger, too, if that’s okay,” Freya said. “And Amarant.”

“What? So you’re makin’ my decisions for me, now, rat-face?” the red head grunted, uncrossing his arms.

“You’ll stay,” she countered lightly, though her expression suggested any opposition would be met

with nothing short of violence.

Amarant snorted.

“I’m so glad you’re all here,” Garnet said, but added a little too fiercely: “But really, the dungeons are strictly off limit. It’s probably best he doesn’t see anyone until I’m sure he’s better.”

“That’s fine,” Freya replied sweetly. “I don’t need to keep an eye on him.” *Because I’m going to keep an eye on you instead.*

“Hey!” Eiko exclaimed suddenly. “Where’s Baku gone?”

0000

Gratuitously, Ruby’s Mini Theatre was deserted. This meant the little troupe of thieves disguised as actors could openly discuss the troubling news relayed to them by their boss.

“I can’t believe this is happening,” Blank said. “I just can’t believe it.”

Baku drank deeply from his flagon and signalled to Ruby to fill up another. “Aint the end of the world yet, kiddo. ’Sides, yer really think Zidane actually tried to murder her?”

Blank spluttered on his beer and slammed it back on the counter so hard the contents slopped over the side. “No! Gods no! Zidane’s a lot of things but he aint a murderer!”

“Do ya think he’s lost his marbles, then?”

Blank rubbed his chin, thoughtfully. “It’s possible, I suppose. I really can’t imagine it, but then who knows what having voices in your head is like? But it was Garnet who said he was too insane to talk to, right?”

“Yup.”

“It all sounds a bit fishy to me,” Cinna concurred. “Lettin’ people just look at him wouldn’t hurt, right? Sounds like she’s got somethin’ to hide.”

“I’ll second that,” Blank agreed sullenly.

Baku was nodding very slowly, head bobbing up and down as if he was falling asleep.

“What do you think happened, boss?” Marcus asked, noting his boisterous boss’ muted attitude.

Baku scratched his beard. “Lemme... lemme think. Err... what was all that stuff ’bout Lerran souls?”

“Terran souls,” Marcus corrected.

“Yeah, yeah. Terran souls. He was hearin’ ’em in his head, right? Like scilophrenia.”

“Schizophrenia,” Marcus corrected.

“That’s the one. So I’m thinking... what if one them souls somehow got into Garnet’s body when she was doin’ that summoning thing and tricked Zidane?”

“Tricked him how?” Cinna asked, warming to this theory.

“I dunno. But maybe he found out that the soul was in Garnet’s body —”

“— and got all messed in the head and tried to kill her?” Blank finished. “And in his mind he was killin’ the Terran soul, but to anyone else it looked like...”

Silence.

“He’s been set up,” Baku stated. “Big time.”

“And y’all know the sentence for attempted assassination of royalty...” Cinna drawled ominously.

“Death.”

“Wait a minute,” Blank intervened. “From what I’ve gathered so far, the Terran souls *need* Zidane. Without him they can’t get their... um... vessels, or whatever. So what would Murmur get out of executing him?”

They sat in silence for a moment, contemplating the idea, but failing to conjure a solution.

“Anyway,” Baku sighed, with an air of finality, “none of that shit matters.”

“Why’s that?”

“’Cause guilty or not, he’s a Tantalus boy, right? And what do Tantalus members do?”

“Look out for each other,” the gang chorused.

“Right. So what are we gonna do?”

“Have a good ol’ bustin’ out of jail session,” Blank exclaimed, cracking his knuckles and letting the grin spread across his face like ink on wet paper. “But the guards Garnet’s got set up around him are top notch, right? It’s gonna be hard.”

“Not if we’ve got inside information,” Cinna said.

“How’re we gonna get that?”

“Through me,” a voice said from behind them.

The group turned as one and found themselves face to face with a blonde girl, no more than fifteen years old, sporting intelligent, deadpan eyes and a vacant expression. A tail swung lifelessly behind her back.

“Hey, it’s you!” Blank cried. “Emotionless-chick!”

She sent him a withering glare. “Mikoto.”

Baku bellowed his thundering laugh and slapped his thigh. “Well I’ll be damned. If it aint Zidane’s little sister!”

“I am not!” she snapped back petulantly. “I’m —”

“Wow, she sure is a cutie,” Cinna commented, rounding on her. “Hey guys, do you think Zid would mind if I took his sister out on a date?”

Mikoto edged away. “Wh-what?”

“Just one!” Cinna pouted. “And it wouldn’t be anything bad. Just —”

“Shut up, pig-head!” Blank yelled and bopped him on the head. He turned back to Mikoto and offered his most dazzling smile. “Don’t pay any attention to those barbarians, Mikoto.”

The Genome blinked up at him with her large, cerulean eyes, unwittingly revealing her true innocence when it came to the nature of Gaians and day-to-day encounters of the ordinary sort. Her isolation on Terra had left her unable to understand domestic interactions with other vivacious life forms, especially life forms as raucous as Tantalus. “Enough!” she barked. “There is no time for banter of a frivolous nature; there are more pressing matters to attend.”

Baku guffawed loudly. “Well they sure do look alike but they aint from the same neck of the woods, that’s fer sure!”

“Listen,” Mikoto said, lips pressed into a thin white line that could be rendered as an expression of anxiety, “what has been suggested about Zidane being tricked is probably true. The soul he deals with, Murmur, was a leading scientist in the Genome Project, therefore her intellect is beyond measure, especially by Gaian standard.”

“Hey, are you callin’ us thick?” Cinna whined.

Blank slapped him again.

“What I’m saying is, she’s no fool. She’s managed to put Zidane into a position he is unable to escape from.”

“So she’s black mailing him?” Marcus pressed.

Mikoto shrugged. “It’s likely. But in truth, I am clueless. However, I don’t trust Garnet, and Murmur is devious and manipulative enough to lull your companions into a state of false security. If she has her way, they might even begin to believe that Zidane is insane *and* guilty. In other words, Murmur will have all the time in the world to get Zidane to succumb to her will.”

“So, what do you suggest?” Baku asked, leaning back on his bar stool.

She smiled; a slight, cold smile, thin as spider thread. “What you did, of course. Rescue him from prison and hear his side of the story. If Murmur *has* possessed Garnet then it means the situation’s about to get worse before it gets better, so before I fled the castle I managed to infiltrate their security protocols and collect the information needed to liberate Zidane from his cell.”

“Wow. You could be a thief!” Blank exclaimed, then added sombrelly: “But what if he has gone, y’know, cuckoo?”

Mikoto shrugged. “Then Murmur will never get her way so none of this will matter. If Zidane can’t think clearly I doubt he’d be able to successfully gather vessels for them. Besides,” she tapped her temple, “I can still hear him thinking, sometimes. Murmur’s trying her best to block me but the occasional snippet gets out and he seems fine so far.”

Tantalus stared at her.

“Weird,” Blank said, “but reassuring.”

They all turned to Baku who downed the rest of his drink. “Alright then boys! And er... lady. Let’s start scheming!”

Please leave an iddy-biddy review just to keep me happy!

8. Light and Dark

*Thank you to those who reviewed! You've all
been very kind :-)*

Chapter Eight L i g h t . A n d . D a r k

“Thank the gods I’m out of that prison cell,” Zidane stated, stretching his arms. “I can’t describe how nice it is to be out and about again. You’ve no idea how awful that place was.”

“It must’ve been horrible,” a voice said softly beside him.

Zidane chuckled and stared up at the brilliant, blue sky, arching away above him. Here and there tufts of cotton-white clouds drifted lazily on a summer breeze, which brought with it the fresh scent of pine needles from the fir tree forest.

“I’m glad I came here, too,” Zidane went on. “The Black Mage Village is so peaceful. I’m glad you suggested it.”

The voice beside him chuckled in a melancholy way. “Oh, Zidane. I didn’t suggest it. You did.”

Zidane raised an eyebrow, as if it didn't matter either way.

He was standing on the bridge beside the inn, absently studying the stream's meandering path and the way the water-weeds waved gaily within its gentle current. Little fish darted in and out of the sunlight, their scales capturing the rays and sparkling like silver sequins.

"It's so relaxing here," he commented dreamily. "I could stay here forever."

"Yeah, me too," the voice said, but again, that sad, wistful tone was prominent.

Suddenly Zidane looked round. "Hey, where is everyone today? I haven't seen any of the Black Mages or Genomes since I broke out of the dungeon."

"Oh, it's just you and me, today."

Zidane thought about this for a moment, then shrugged.

The person sighed. "Listen, Zidane. Things aren't going to get easier. In fact they're gonna get a lot harder. You need to be really, really strong, okay? Stronger than you've ever been before."

Zidane laughed lightly. “Are you lecturing me? Usually it’s the other way round!”

“I’m not kidding around, Zidane,” the little voice said sternly. “Please. For everyone’s sake you must be strong. Hold on. Keep going. You’re gonna have to do some pretty nasty stuff but if you don’t stay strong, you’ll fail.”

The uncharacteristic seriousness in his friend’s tone made him turn and cast him a questioning glance.

Vivi Orunitia stared back with those expressive, amber eyes.

And then it hit him.

“I’m dreaming, aren’t I?”

Vivi nodded, slowly, sadly. “Sorry.”

Zidane smiled. “S’okay. I miss you, Vivi.”

“I miss you, too, Zidane.”

“You’re serious about the whole ‘keeping my head’ thing?”

“Yup. I’m not too worried though. I only stopped by to say I believe in you.”

Zidane smiled. “That means a lot to me.”

Vivi beamed. “Well, I’ve said all I had to say. Now all that’s left is for you to —”

“No please gods don’t say it —”

“— wake up.”

0000

Zidane awoke as commanded in his dirty, dark, stinking cell with the scent of fir trees tickling his senses and burst into tears.

0000

If he had to guess, he would’ve said he’d been down there for two weeks (though it felt so much longer) but truthfully, he hadn’t a clue. The little square of light was his only window to the outside world, but that didn’t even face outside, and the light in the corridor was never extinguished, so how was he to know? It was like some psychological torture. He desperately wanted to know whether it was morning, noon or night, so at least he’d have some perspective and, perhaps, something to think about. But the only person he’d seen all week (day, month?) was the masked soldier who bought him

food. He'd tried asking him on several occasions but the man was completely unresponsive.

After three days (though Zidane wasn't aware of the time) Garnet/Murmur granted that his arms be lowered from the ceiling from where they were strung by heavy chains. The Genome had lost all feeling in his arms a few hours after being shackled, and the initial pain had subsided into an uncomfortable and worrying numbness. And at first, he thought it an act of kindness, but after a few moments of blood pounding back into his limbs the numbness ebbed away, replaced by a splitting pain that didn't subside for hours. And then, when he thought he might be able to move said limbs again, the soldier would return and shackle them above his head once more, and he would have to suffer the agony of having the blood drain from his arms all over again.

His legs weren't so much of a problem. He was permanently seated on the hard ground (the thick collar around his neck and waist preventing him from standing) but he was granted enough margin to shimmy round, even hunch over so he was essentially supported by his own shackles. At first, this made for a comfortable sleeping position, but eventually the iron manacles chaffed his skin so

badly it bled, and a ring of blisters reared sensitive heads. Now it hurt if Zidane even turned his head to look around.

The smell of his waste he got used to, as well as forcing down the tasteless slop they brought him every mealtime (it was like swallowing cold sick), but what he couldn't adjust to was the loneliness. Zidane being Zidane, all he wanted was someone to talk to. Being cooped up in a dark, damp cell was one thing, but being completely isolated from society was unbearable. It was driving him mad. He wouldn't have cared if Necron had walked in and offered to chat, he would've taken up the offer as eagerly as he would if it had been Freya.

But no one came, and the days dragged into weeks. He became a shadow of his former self, hair growing lank and long with grease, ribs poking through skin as if trying to claw their way out of his chest. His eyes were hollow and sunken and lifeless within their sockets, glowing with unnatural fever. When he breathed he wheezed, his throat felt tight and often he would succumb to deep coughing fits that wracked his entire body for several minutes. He shivered, but felt hot. His skin was perpetually damp, either from sweat or the moisture seeping from the ceiling, he couldn't tell.

There was practically no way to keep himself occupied, either. He found a tiny, sharp piece of flint nearby and he scratched aimlessly at the floor with it. It was too dark to tell if it left a mark, but he continued ‘drawing’ anyway, just to kill time. He sifted through memories like looking through a photo album. He slept a lot. Often, he wondered what he’d do if he was forced to stay here the rest of his life, but that thought was too terrible to contemplate, so he pushed it far from mind.

Then one day, she finally came.

He heard her before he saw her, and knew by the tell-tale *click-click* of her heels that it wasn’t the normal food-bringing soldier. He tried to straighten himself, muster up what little strength and resolve remained burning, tried to summon the fiery soul he once possessed.

The rusty, iron door screeched hideously as it opened and he blinked as the light flooded in, blinding him momentarily. When he’d regained his sight he found her standing alone in the doorway, peering down at him with mild disdain.

For a fleeting, sickly moment he thought it was Garnet. The real Garnet, and almost burst into tears. How he longed to be held and loved! But the

illusion slipped away like a dream when Garnet's face twisted into that gods-awful sneer.

"Kami," she breathed. "You've looked better."

If she'd been closer he would have spat in her beautiful, perfect face.

She sensed his hostility and said: "Try anything and I'll leave you for another two weeks. Be good and we'll have a nice chat. Would you like that, kami?"

Zidane glared at her.

"Answer me," she snapped. "Would you like that?"

He tried but all that came out was an abrasive, croaking noise. He cleared his throat and this time managed a hoarse: "Yes."

Murmur's sneer deepened, obviously thrilled by his obedience. She entered the cell, blissfully leaving the door open and letting the light filter though. Zidane wallowed in it.

Murmur crouched in front of him, seemingly unperturbed by his unsightly stench and appearance. She lovingly trailed a hand down his bare chest and

it took all of Zidane's resolve not to reach down and bite her fingers off.

"Kami," she sighed, 'it doesn't have to be this way, you know. If only you would agree to become what you're eventually going to be anyway, then all this needless suffering would vanish in an instant.' She gently caressed his tail but he flicked it from her grasp. "I know what makes you tick, darling. I've taken away everything you know and love: sunlight, space, freedom, even your precious lover." She gestured toward Garnet's possessed body to empathise. "You could have it all back if you become our kami."

Zidane stared into her eyes. "Everything?"

"Everything."

"You... you would release Dagger?"

Murmur nodded.

Zidane looked at the floor, then back at her. "Alright then, I'll —"

Murmur suddenly reared back, as if she'd been struck. She clutched her head and released a piercing scream, hair draping over pale face and when she sat up the sneer had vanished and was replaced by a

look of complete disorientation. Then her eyes fixed on Zidane and she suddenly seemed to remember herself.

“Oh, Zid!” she cried in Garnet’s voice and flung her arms about his shackled neck.

Zidane froze, wide eyes unblinking. “D-Dagger? Is that you?”

She pulled away and when he looked into her chocolate-brown eyes he knew it was. She had regained control of her body. He laughed with joy and struggled against his bonds in a futile attempt to hug her to him. He shamelessly let the tears coarse down his cheeks.

“Oh gods Dagger, is it really truly you? Oh gods!”

“Zidane!” she cried. ‘Oh Zidane what has she done to you? I’m so sorry!’ She was sobbing. “It’s all my fault! I summoned her with an old spell but she somehow managed to possess me!”

“Sshh,” he said, savouring her presence, “don’t worry. You’re back now.”

But she pulled away and stared fearfully, urgently into his eyes. “No. No it’s not over. She’s not gone

and... and she's coming back..." Garnet winced.
"I've got to —"

"No, Dagger don't leave me please!"

"Hush, now, my love. There's not much time so I have to speak quickly." She winced again and this time recuperation took longer and she seemed somewhat breathless. "Listen... I-listen to me carefully, Zid —"

"But—"

"Listen! Don't agree to become kami just yet. When the time comes, you must chose. Zidane, you must become kami and destroy the Terran souls. If you don't then... argh... uh..."

"Dagger!"

She was really panting now, clutching her head like it was going to split in two. "No... time. Must... do it... when..."

And then she collapsed on the floor, eyes rolling back in their sockets.

"Dagger! Dagger!" he yelled, wriggling uselessly against his binds. "Wake up!"

Garnet groaned and sat up, head in hands. When she looked up he knew the Garnet he loved was gone.

“What... what did that little bitch tell you?” Murmur hissed. She leaned forward, lips rearing in an animalistic snarl. “What did she just tell you?”

Zidane swallowed and shook his head. “Loved me. Said she loved me.”

Murmur studied his eyes and he returned it unflinching. He was a thief. He was an adept liar.

Murmur nodded, seemingly satisfied, and returned to their previous thread of conversation as if nothing had occurred.

“So you’ll do it?”

“Dagger’s still in you.”

Murmur trembled with fury. “Will. You. Do. It.”

“Will you release Dagger?”

Murmur cracked a tight smile. “Of course. Anything you desire, kami.”

Zidane looked away. Garnet had told him to become kami. Why? He didn’t understand at all!

Could he do it? Become what Garland had ordained?
But he didn't trust Murmur. Not one bit.

"Liar," he said, finally.

Murmur blinked. "But kami you —"

"Don't fuck with me. It's a trick to make me get you vessels."

"No tricks."

"Fucking liar!"

She slapped him then, hard and stinging across the face. He doubled over, raw skin chaffing against iron, and fell into a coughing fit so fierce he spat up blood.

Murmur waited patiently for it to subside and silently observed the constant tremor that rippled across his wasted body. The unnatural light in his eyes. The signs of fever. If he stayed down here he would die. That would be an immense shame, but no great loss.

As if sensing her calculating stare, Zidane said: "You have to let me out sometime, anyway. I'll die if you don't, and then what'll you do?"

Murmur sneered. “I think you’ll find I don’t *have* to anything, kami. Don’t you know? If you die then the Third Angel’s dormant power will be awakened and *she* will become our kami, fulfil her purpose willingly.”

“Then why not just leave me here to rot?” he spat.

With startling speed she extended a hand and entwined it in his hair, leaning forward and capturing his chapped lips between hers. Zidane tried to pull away but she wouldn’t let him and when she ran her tongue along his cracked upper lip he nipped it hard enough to bring blood . She leapt back, angry and surprised.

“You bastard!” she hissed, then chuckled darkly. ‘But that’s what I like about you, kami. You’ve got so much fire. I think of you as a professional challenge. The ultimate prize to be won. Killing you and getting the Third Angel to do my work would be too easy, do you understand?’ She stood up. “I can see you need more time to think. Maybe another few weeks would be sufficient enough —”

“No! No please don’t shut the door again!” he cried, ashamed of his pathetic begging. “Please please don’t leave me in the dark again —”

“Then you’ll become kami? You’ll do it?”

He froze. No, there must be another way out. He just had to think. Think really hard. There must be a catch. And now he knew she’d come back again...

“No,” he said finally. “No I wont.”

She looked disappointed and angry at once. Then the sneer returned and she said: “Very well. Have it your way. I’ll see you again in two weeks.” She slammed the door and turned so he could see her face through the little window. He could hear her searching for something, pulling an article from the bodice of her dress which stimulated a muted, feathery swish. “But let’s make it a little more interesting, shall we?”

And then she was blocking in the little square of light with a strip of material and this time Zidane really did start pleading, begging, *screaming*. The light disappeared bit by bit, darkness becoming absolute and hot tears were streaming down his sunken cheeks.

He passed out from emotional exhaustion before she had finished blocking up the hole.

God, I’m a mean, aren’t I? Lol. And it’s gonna get a whole lot worse before it gets better, too! So please

leave a review, or you'll never find out what happens next heehee.

9. Escape

Chapter Nine E s c a p e

“You’re losing yourself.”

Zidane opened his eyes and found himself in an environment so astoundingly inimitable he struggled at once to comprehend it. Towers constructed of iridescent material scraped the pearly sky; twisted, intricate structures jutted from smooth, artificial tiers like stalagmites, interlaced by an elaborate cobweb of slender bridges. Sleek aircrafts resembling flower pods soundlessly skimmed above ground level. Willowy, silver-skinned people ambled along shimmering streets and motionless pools of ethereal water reflected the landscape with a mirror-like property.

Zidane blinked. *Where am I?*

“This is Terra,” a voice answered, “before the planet essentially died, of course.”

Zidane turned and found his creator standing by a pool, hands behind his back, overlooking the surreal

landscape. His cloak hung to his ankles, limp as a flag on a windless day.

“Terra?” Zidane repeated numbly. “H-how?”

Garland tapped his temple. “Created from my memory. Beautiful isn’t it?”

Zidane scrutinised his environment. It was unquestionably extraordinary, and yes, beautiful but in a cold, inanimate kind of way. Even with the Terran’s drifting aimlessly from place to place and the implausible structures searing the sky, it retained an unnerving stillness. To Zidane, beauty lied within the rustle of leaves and the churn of waves. This immobility reminded him of death. In fact, everything about Terra reminded him of death.

“I see you’ve met Murmur.” It was not a question. ‘Quite a handful, isn’t she? She always has been. Permanently fiery, desperately seeking power but never attaining it. She wanted my job, did you know?’ He chuckled humourlessly. “I wonder if she would have succeeded where I failed? Or should I say... maybe she *will* succeed where I failed.”

(you told me you’d become my angel of death)

Zidane shook his head. “Everything’s so confusing. I don’t understand at all.”

(but think for a moment... Isn't life death itself? It must kill other life-forms to survive...)

“What’s there to understand?” Garland said expansively. “You are becoming.”

“No!” Zidane cried. “Shut up!”

(a world in which life and death become one...)

“You will become the reaper of Gaia, Zidane. And as you reap the restless souls of Terra will fill the vessels as they stand before the brink of death, and finally... *finally* Gaia will become Terra.”

“No! No! Never! I’ll never be what you want me to be!”

“You will become

(beings that transcend life and death)

the reaper. “” Shut up! “Zidane lashed out at him but Garland teleported out of reach. The Terrans continued to amble by oblivious, nothing more than creations of a deranged mind.

(who are you)

“Who are you, Zidane?”

“I am me!” Zidane screamed. “I am *me*! I am a Gaian!”

“Terra will become Gaia whether or not you become their kami.”

“No!”

“*She* will see to that.”

(you are destined to live among the stars for all eternity)

“No!”

“Yes. With a single sacrifice you will become.”

(you have the power, the position, and the motive to do it)

“Please...” Zidane dropped to his knees.
“Please... no...”

Garland closed the gap between them with assertive strides.

“If you do not then the responsibility will be passed unto Mikoto anyway, and Garnet’s soul will remain forever trapped within a body she cannot control.”

“Gods please I can’t —”

“If you agree then you will have influence over every soul, dead and alive.”

“Never!”

“Don’t you remember?”

(I’ll destroy Terra! That’s reason enough for my birth here as a Genome!)

(and we believed in you the same way you believed in us!)

(just wanted to say I believe in you)

(just like you protected us)

(we want to protect you)

“Don’t you remember what you said? What you swore to me?” He sneered. “Why not turn it back on Murmur?”

(the motive — position — power)

(I AM the new angel of death! Yours!!)

“Do you understand now, Zidane? Who are you? Who are you?”

Zidane rose from the ground slowly. “Yes, I see. I am —”

The food-bringing soldier abruptly tore him from the dream-disguised revelation. He found himself drenched in cold sweat and shaking with unnatural ferocity that was the consequence of illness rather than concoctions of his unconsciousness (though he wished he could claim the latter).

He looked round out of habit, but his eyes raked nothing but shadows. The darkness cloaking him was absolute; it infiltrated and demolished his senses. Even after seven days of being imprisoned his eyes (and mind) had yet to adjust to temporary blindness. It was suffocating.

But what was worse, he was painfully, almost irreversibly sick. There was no question about it any longer: he was dying.

The door creaked open and blinding whiteness claimed superiority over blinding blackness. He didn't even bother trying to see anymore, just kept his eyes shut until the man lowered his shackled arms enough to permit access to the cold-sick slop and left again. The entire process was always executed in awful silence that Zidane no longer attempted to penetrate. The food-bringing man never

spoke, not since the day Zidane had first been imprisoned.

“Dear, sweet gods,” the food-bringing man said.

0000

Zidane opened his eyes and desperately tried to blink and blink away his blindness. The burning light was encompassing. All he could discern was disfigured blurs and even those were questionable. He heard hurried footsteps.

“Z-Zidane? Is that... is that really you?”

He recognised the voice. A voice from another lifetime. “Bl-Bl... ank?”

“Dear, sweet gods,” was his reply, “it *is* you! Shit-in-hell Zidane, what happened?”

The bleariness was passing enough for Zidane to discern the splodges of colour he recognised as the food-bring man’s uniform. He shook his head in an attempt to clear his vision further and was rewarded with hot pain shooting up his chaffed neck. He groaned and coughed until blood trickled from his lips.

Blank removed the mask he’d stolen from the unconscious guard outside and gently gripped

Zidane's shoulders. "I can't believe she's treating you like this! I mean... you look a fucking mess!"

Zidane's lips twitched upward into a watery grin despite his fatigued state. He had no physical means to determine his outward appearance, but guessed he wasn't a particularly pleasant sight to behold.

"C'mon we don't have much time," Blank said. 'It took us ages to find a way past the guards. We broke our budget twice making the counterfeit key for your manacles, y'know.' He was unlocking them as he spoke. "And Mikoto had to do some serious spy work to know what times the guard brought you food. Seriously, man, you owe us *big* time!"

Zidane was too weak to reply. He felt like weeping when Blank unlocked the iron collar around his neck.

"Can you stand?" Blank asked.

For the first time in a month Zidane attempted to rise. His legs felt like jelly; they trembled beneath his weight — however meagre it was now — and eventually Blank wordlessly assisted him, arm looped around his waist for support. He looked like he'd lost twenty pounds, which was worrying

because Zidane could hardly spare twenty pounds in the first place.

“I can’t believe she kept you in here. I just can’t believe it. I’ve seen animals treated better than this! And she kept you in the dark the whole time? Didn’t clean the cell at all?”

But Zidane didn’t answer. He limped eagerly toward the door, toward daylight — gods, daylight, how he’d missed it! — toward fresh air, the sky, the grass beneath his feet. He decided there and then that if he was dreaming now he’d kill himself the moment he awoke. Sometimes his dreams of freedom were the worst kind of torture.

But this was no dream, it seemed. Blank cautiously (and painstakingly) aided his ascent up the slippery, precarious stairwell and out into the belly of West Tower. Here, they found Cinna and Marcus dressed as Alexandrian soldiers, playing lookout from a shadowy recess beneath a second flight of stairs. They gasped and spluttered and generally fussed in a rather unmanly fashion over Zidane’s condition, until they decided they could no longer risk deferring their flight and departed.

Outside, Zidane was dismayed to find it nighttime. He longed to experience the sun’s warmth

and dazzling brilliance.

“Here’s the tricky bit,” Blank whispered, breaking away his reflections. “We’ve managed to incapacitate and distract the guards meant to be surveying the surrounding premises, but someone’s bound to discover the mishap soon. We have to sneak you out of here as quickly as possible via the canal. The route there is particularly dark and hopefully no one will notice. Plus...” Blank pulled a hessian bag from the folds of his uniform. “It’s also the journey made by convicts facing execution. They wear these bags over their heads and are led to a separate dungeon near the city square; you know the one. Hopefully this’ll disguise you but try and keep your tail still so it’s not noticed.”

He gently tugged the bag over Zidane’s head, which successfully limited a rather important amount of air supply to the exhausted genome’s lungs and excessive shaking preceded an explosive coughing convulsion. Blank fervently wished he could make time for his brother to rest, but it simply couldn’t be done. Zidane would have to hold up until they cleared the castle grounds.

Blank, Marcus and Cinna brusquely marched Zidane along the winding trails, formally saluting

any individual that crossed their path and receiving a disconcertingly amount of suspicious looks in return. Yet no one stopped them and they increased their pace as much as Zidane's diminished state would allow.

They blessedly made it to the canal without interference and found Baku and Mikoto standing by a stolen boat, as planned. They unceremoniously dumped Zidane inside for the sake of possible onlookers (invoking another coughing fit of worrying proportions) before jumping in themselves, causing the boat to rock unpleasantly from side to side.

Just as the Alarm Whistles were tolling from the West Tower area, Baku pushed the boat from the dock with his foot, sending them sailing away from Alexandria Castle where, undoubtedly, Zidane's miraculous escape had just been exposed.

0000

Freya, Eiko and Amarant lingered outside the One Rose Inn, gingerly scouting for any possible spies that would report their sighting back to Garnet. Once in agreement that their movements remained unnoticed, the trio entered the building with evident relief and some caution.

The One Rose Inn was situated on the outskirts of Alexandria, overlooking the dirty, stinking industrial port. The harbour was directly connected to the castle's canal, and the water was an unhealthy shade of brown-green and questionable consistency. The inn itself was a weathered, dishevelled thing, with rotting wooden planks that squeaked like nobody's business and faded furniture in every room. However, it suited their needs perfectly, and the owner owed Baku a favour he couldn't refuse.

Upon entry, the innkeeper directed them to Room 12, a large space well concealed on the top floor. The trio thought it would be a state but it was surprisingly well kept, the windows thick enough to keep the night's chill at bay, especially with the tatty curtains drawn.

Tantalus members were scattered about here; Baku dominating the centre, Blank casually reclined against a wall, Cinna perched on the edge of the single bed and Marcus staring distractedly out a gap in the curtains.

"Greetings," Freya said. "Did everything go according to plan?"

"Better than we hoped," Blank confirmed with a nonchalant wave. "Couldn't have done it without

you guys though.”

“Alexandrian knights are push-overs,” Amarant dully informed, cracking his knuckles. “Nothing to it.”

“Where is he?” Eiko piqued. “Zidane, I mean.”

The Tantalus members exchanged glances that dictated unspoken foreboding.

“In there,” Baku said, cocking a thumb to a door, “with Mikoto.”

“Is he sane?” Eiko asked.

Baku shrugged. “See for yourself.”

The trio left through the door indicated and found themselves in a room not dissimilar to the previous in upkeep, but half the size, resulting in a pokey, cupboard area barely spacious enough to accommodate the single bed and cupboard within.

Mikoto squatted on a chair beside the bed, but it wasn’t her that caught their attention.

Incapacitated beneath the covers lay Zidane, well, what they assumed to be Zidane. His cheeks were sunken and his frame skeletal at best, complexion a ghastly grey and closed lids lilywhite against a black

backdrop. His hair was a tangled lump; a shadow of its former healthy hue. His breaths came in jagged, wheezing gasps.

“Zidane...” Freya breathed.

Amarant grunted.

“Wh-what’s wrong with him?” Eiko stuttered.

Mikoto wiped a line of blood from Zidane’s parted lips. “Dying,” she stated, ‘of an incurable ailment induced by unhealthy living conditions.’ She shook her head. “Blank described his cell to me... It’s no wonder. Any longer and it would have been too late.”

Freya ghosted across the carpet and tenderly placed a hand upon the thief’s forehead. She drew back sharply, breath hissing between teeth.

“Hot,” she said. “Burning.”

Mikoto said nothing.

“I knew Dagger was possessed,” Eiko whispered, more to herself than anyone, “the moment I saw her. Knew she wasn’t right. That’s why I helped get him out. I didn’t believe anything she said.”

Freya nodded. “No one did, Eiko. And thank the gods we didn’t. Just look what she’s done to him!”

They wordlessly left Zidane to rest and returned to the room where Tantalus waited in fretful silence. Baku opened his mouth to question Zidane’s state, but after surveying the grim expressions decided against it.

“There’s no question, then,” Freya said. “Dagger is indeed possessed by a vengeful Terran spirit.”

“But he’s dying!” Cinna squawked. “Thought you said she needed him?”

Mikoto nodded. “She does, to a point. She was probably blackmailing him, hoping to break his mind and spirit. Considering his current health, I’m speculating he didn’t comply.”

“Stubborn ’til the end,” Amarant snorted.

“So, what now?” Blank questioned. “She’s gonna come lookin’ for him, and if there’s that weird link between the two it wont take long.”

“We’ll deal with that when it comes,” Baku replied shortly and the subject remained partially buried beneath a translucent layer of unease.

“If it helps, I think I know how he can attain vessels,” Mikoto told them.

“What?” Marcus exclaimed. “How’d ya figure it out?”

“I didn’t,” she said, “Garland came to me in a dream and told me.”

“Garland?” Baku asked.

“Mine and Zidane’s creator.”

“Your father, then?”

Mikoto smiled wryly. “In a sense. Anyway, he said with one sacrifice Zidane will become a Terran god and reap the Gaian people, essentially becoming his angel of death.”

“Sounds lovely,” Blank replied. “But how will killing loads of people make vessels?”

“After being slain the soul is the first thing to dissipate,” Mikoto explained, “and for a fraction of a second the body is still animate and, essentially, an empty vessel. In that pinprick of time the closest Terran soul will accommodate the body, becoming its new owner. When that body expires Zidane will reap anew, and the soul can reclaim a fresh body, effectively becoming immortal.”

“But Zidane’ll eventually die, too. Then what?” Cinna asked.

Mikoto shook her head. “The moment Zidane makes that sacrifice and becomes a god, he will claim immortality, forever reaping and replacing souls of the dead.”

A stunned silence over took them. What she was suggesting was almost beyond comprehension. Zidane: a god? Immortal? A reaper? The thought was simply absurd.

“But... wait a minute,” Eiko said. “Um, aren’t the Terran souls like, in a different world or something?”

Mikoto shrugged. “I am uncertain. Garland did not relay all this information out of good will. He was mainly gloating and hinting. I deciphered as much as I could.”

“So you could be wrong?” Amarant reworded.

Mikoto shrugged. “I don’t see what else we have to go on.”

“The whole thing is just ridiculously colossal, I can’t imagine the torture Zidane must have endured being blackmailed by a woman possessing his only

love!” Freya exclaimed. “He has no reason to go along with her scheme!”

“Quite the contrary,” Mikoto said. “He could gain everything. Life and death at his expenditure, immortality, power beyond imagining. As a god he could control the movements of the very souls that cycle within Gaia’s core. He would essentially become a new and improved Iifa”

“Zidane wouldn’t want all that!” Eiko cried.

Mikoto cast her a dark look. “Are you so sure? Once a person has a taste of such immense power I don’t think they’d be able to keep righteous thoughts and morals anchored so easily.”

“No! No! You’re wrong!” Eiko shrieked, eyes watering. “I don’t care what you say!”

Freya reached out to the girl. “Eiko don’t —”

“I’m going to see Zidane!” she yelled and scuttled through the door.

The silent group shook their heads in dismay and Mikoto stared after her blandly.

“You didn’t have to be so blunt,” Blank ridiculed. “She’s just a kid. And besides —”

The door burst open and Eiko faced them, pale and unsteady on her feet, voice hysterical as she shrieked: “He’s gone, guys! Zidane’s gone!”

Thank you for the reviews, everyone. I’m glad people like (is that the right word?) Murmur. OC’s don’t usually go down well. Hopefully it’s clear how Zidane’s meant to get the Terran’s vessels, but if you have any questions don’t hesitate to ask :) Next chapter ahoy!

10. Becoming

Just so everyone has a good idea of where my fics stand and how they're progressing, I'm gonna start putting in random little updates on my profile, so if you're curious about a fic hopefully it'll answer your questions. And to all the new reviewers and the silent reviewers who have put this fic under their favourites/alerts: thank you.

The italic sentences in brackets are quotes from the game, for the person that asked in a review :-)

Enjoy!

Chapter 10 B e c o m i n g

Dripping in sweat and suffering hot and cold flushes of ridiculous proportions, Zidane Tribal staggered like a drunk down the cobbled streets of Alexandria, using the gleaming blade of the castle as a guide. The structures encompassing him swam in and out of focus, every step seeming to cost vital minutes of his life. Breathing was the most laborious act of all; every inhalation ripped through his lungs like fire, often invoking a skull splitting coughing fit

that resulted in increasingly large globules of blood splattering the cobblestones.

He didn't know what he was thinking, really. Thinking was a luxury his deteriorated body refused to grant. He was acting on instinct alone, and at that moment instinct was telling him he couldn't rest until Garnet — the real Garnet — was safely back in his arms.

And he had a plan. It was a risky, vague plan he had concocted (while clumsily climbing out the window of the little room he'd awoken in and sliding down the rickety gutter) and the success rate wasn't particularly promising because it depended on variables out of his control, but it was all he had. It was all he could think of to save Garnet and Gaia from certain destruction. And judging by the state of his health, he didn't have long to put his plan to action.

Panting, Zidane rounded a corner and almost fainted with relief when he spotted a cluster of Alexandrian soldiers. They were preoccupied raiding houses, no doubt under Murmur's orders to locate her missing prisoner. He could hear bumps and crashes resonating from within dwellings, alongside horrified pleas from residents.

Zidane opened his mouth to call out but all that surfaced was a gummy croak and a spray of blood. He wiped it away absently and stumbled toward the soldiers instead, waving his stick-thin arms.

They didn't notice him for a while and when they finally did they were incapable of any activity aside wide-eyed gawping. Zidane swayed on the spot and let a grin eclipse his dilapidated features. It was only then that the soldiers surged forward and overwhelmed him (he doubted he could've resisted in his state even if he weren't inclined to surrender, anyway) and bound his wrists behind his back, causing a feeble grunt of pain on his behalf as the ropes chaffed against raw wounds.

At first they forced him to walk, but when he couldn't keep their pace the soldiers quickly determined his state of health and resolved to carry him. Zidane couldn't have asked for more and wallowed in the rest they unwittingly bestowed. He'd need every ounce of strength if he wanted to carry out his plan successfully.

0000

Murmur lounged gracelessly upon her throne, upper body at an angle to the bottom, leg crossed theatrically over the other. Her elbow was propped

upon the arm of the chair, head resting in splayed fingers while the other tapped impatiently on her thigh.

“So,” she said expansively, using Garnet’s voice, “you escaped... but turned yourself in not an hour later?”

Zidane, who had been forced to grovel before her (not that he minded; he could barely stand), glared furiously beneath his eyelashes. Steiner and Beatrix stood either side of her, like pieces on a game board. They looked tired and emotional fatigued, dedicated loyalty seeming paper-thin.

“Why?” she pressed.

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“Talk?”

“Talk.”

“How do I know you’re not going to attack me again?”

He laughed maliciously. “Look at me! I couldn’t attack even if I wanted to!”

Murmur sniffed disdainfully and clawed his tousled form with obsidian eyes. “I suppose not.

You're dismissed, General, Captain."

"Your Highness he —"

"But My Lady —"

"Now!" Murmur snapped, smoothly severing their objections. "Please leave us."

Steiner and Beatrix, ever loyal, exchanged a glance and departed swiftly with a stiff bow.

Alone now, Murmur dropped the act and returned to using her normal voice. She tilted forward, a sneer twisting Garnet's beautiful face into something hateful. "Talk, do you? I should kill you for running away like that!"

Zidane shrugged. "Fine. But you'll be missing out."

Murmur's eyes narrowed but failed to veil her curiosity. Zidane, on the other hand, succeeded in hiding his smirk.

Murmur reclined back onto the throne and waved her hand. "Go on then. I'll hear you out. But know this: if it's not to my liking I'll kill you instantly."

Zidane sat down properly, fighting to remain conscious and keep his croaky voice from faltering.

“I came back to offer you a compromise, Murmur.”

Eyebrow arched. “Is that so?”

“Give me back Dagger, and I’ll become your kami.”

Murmur smiled. “Stupid boy. Do you even know what you’re talking about?”

“I don’t have to know. I just want Dagger back and that’s enough.”

Murmur seemed to think about this for a long time and as the minutes ticked by Zidane became increasingly unnerved by the sly expression spreading across her visage. Eventually, she said: “Do you even know how to get her back?”

Zidane shook his head.

“Currently, I am in control of Garnet’s body. If you destroy Garnet’s essence while I am currently in possession of it, my soul will be torn from this vessel and forced to join the mass of Terra’s restless souls.”

“But I can’t destroy Garnet’s body! Where will *her* soul go?”

Murmur waved a hand. “Not destroy then. Just mortally wound.”

“That’s no better!” Zidane cried.

“You have no choice. It is the only way. A soul can only be severed from its vessel via death, or something close to it. Because I am currently dominating Garnet’s body I will be exorcised, and Garnet’s soul will be able to surface permanently. I was able to partly take control of Garnet’s body because the Laws of Souls is weakened within a summoning circle such as she created when calling me.” She paused to let a predatory grin split her features. “But you know what will happen if you agree to all this.”

“I’ll become kami.”

“Yes.”

Zidane looked down at his hands. They shook violently and he wished he could say it was just because of his illness.

“And if I... if I mortally wound Garnet while you’re in control... Garnet’s soul will be freed from its prison and she’ll be... normal again?”

“Yes. And you will finally become what Terra desires.”

Zidane took a deep, shuddering breath and fought the urge to cough again. His head swam and spun and dipped. He could feel a worrying blackness ebbing in the corner of his mind, as gentle and persistent as the ocean.

Death.

Now or never, Zidane thought. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

Murmur rose from the throne and descended the steps. He managed to find his feet, too, after substantial grunting, staggering and swaying.

Murmur withdrew a dagger — his dagger, he noticed despondently — from a holder hidden beneath her long skirt. Her eyes shone like a serpents: stony, calculating, completely devoid of geniality. She handed the weapon to him hilt first, and he accepted the weight almost lovingly. How he’d missed the comforting presence of his weapons!

He gripped the handle in shaking hands, felt the breath clawing his lungs with fiery talons, and stared into Garnet’s eyes, desperately trying to eliminate

any adoration attached to the countenance. Murmur's stare raped him of any coherent thought.

Zidane raised the dagger above his head.

(you have the power, the position and the motive to do it)

(I AM the new angel of death! Yours!!)

(I believe in you)

And then, with a ragged cry, the dagger came whistling down, down in slow motion.

Locked within a dream-like state Zidane witnessed Murmur reach out and push the dagger right a fraction. The blade was set to pierce her heart and in that split second the momentum and delayed reaction caused by confusion and dulled senses prevented him from reverting the dagger's path.

And in that split second he watched Murmur's expression change, slip and slide and melt away, like a mask dropping from an actor's face, and for that tiny, tiny second he realised too late that Murmur had tricked him once again.

The dagger plunged into Garnet's chest just as Murmur exorcised herself. Zidane saw the change in

her eyes. Saw them alter from slender and cunning to large, guileless and dazed.

Then time seemed to resume its normal pace and an awful, agonising cry tore itself from Zidane's throat as he realised the extent of Murmur's trickery and his own stupid naivety.

Garnet — the real Garnet — staggered, hands trembling by her breast where the dagger hilt protruded like a pernicious flower. A dark stain was slowly spreading across the front of her white dress.

"Z-Zidane..." she whispered, voice seeming to fade and break apart, brittle like a dead leaf.

Zidane watched her, numb and unblinking, unable to believe what his eyes were so cruelly imparting. His hands still gripped the hilt, warm from his grasp.

"No," he whispered. "No. Dagger please... I... I didn't mean... oh gods. *Oh gods!*"

Garnet fell backward and he released the hilt and clumsily caught her fragile form in his arms, an awful parody of an embrace. She swallowed wetly and her breath became jagged gulps. A thin trickle of blood escaped from her closed lips.

Zidane gently lowered her to the floor, eyes never leaving hers.

“Dagger,” he whispered, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t... I didn’t...”

And she smiled. Slight and intangible, lips flecked with blood. “Hush, love. I... I forgive... everything... I... I am... t-the sorry... one...”

“No!” he whispered fiercely, tears brimming over lids and curving down his cheeks. “Don’t say that! It’s not your fault.”

Her smile never wavered, just flickered slightly as breathing became more arduous. Her white bodice was utterly crimson now and he pressed his hand against the wound in a fruitless attempt to prevent the blood flow.

“You... must... stop... Murmur before... before... too late...” she whispered, voice so faint he could barely hear. “P-promise...”

He smoothed her locks away from her face, tears dripping onto her cheeks, running down her neck. Always so selfless, even in her final moments. “I will. I swear it. I will.”

Garnet sighed, as if a great burden had been lifted from her shoulders, and her eyes abruptly lost focus.

Dead.

Zidane stared numbly at her for several seconds, unable to think, unable to feel. His heart beat fervently inside his chest, blood pounding in his ears. His hands were drenched in blood. Her blood. His cheeks were slick with tears. How could this have happened? How could he have been so ruthlessly deceived again? How he could be so gods-damn *stupid*?

But it wasn't over yet.

Garnet's body suddenly convulsed and a gurgling, deep-throated gasp bubbled from her mouth. Blood oozed steadily down her chin and her eyes snapped open.

Alarmed and elated, Zidane leapt back.

"Dagger! Dagger are you...?"

Garnet jerkily sat up, twitching like a corpse. She looked down at her bloodstained corset and with trembling hands gripped the handle. She grit her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut and with one

tortuous cry she tore the dagger from her chest, inducing a sickening cracking noise.

Torn from his initial shock and horror, Zidane was about to rush forward when suddenly he realised something wasn't right. The wound — it was clean! There wasn't a drop of blood spurting from its jagged mouth. And what's more... Garnet was *glowing*. Radiating an azure light that pulsed like a heartbeat.

“D-Dagger...?”

Garnet looked up at him and he fell to his knees in despair. That sneer was twisting her expression again and her eyes sparked hard as steel.

“No...” he whispered, feeling the last of his energy drain from him. “No...”

Murmur got to her feet and Zidane watched, numb, as the mortal wound he had inflicted on Garnet quivered and began to heal, flesh knitting together and becoming smooth once more, any sign of the infliction gone save the clean tear in the front of the bodice.

“How...?” he whispered again, tears shimmering anew.

Murmur's sneer deepened and she threw the dagger away; let it skitter across the floor. "You are the reaper," she hissed. 'Any wounds inflicted on the vessel immediately heal once the new soul has filled the empty space. Poor fool, deluded by your love. Didn't know I could do that did you? Tear my soul away from a vessel? It's a Terran talent.' She laughed spitefully. "But what would you know of Terran talent when you consider yourself Gaian? If you paid more attention to your roots then maybe you wouldn't be in this predicament. I exorcised myself just before the dagger pierced my heart, forcing Garnet to become the dominant soul and bear the brunt of the wound. When she died I was able to permanently claim her body. Now it is mine! And you..." She sneered. "...have *become*..."

Zidane blinked and stared down at his hands, feeling like a spectator to a play. They were glowing. *He* was glowing. Glowing that same sickly-gold that Murmur's wound had emanated. His skin simply *radiated* the hue. It blinked and pulsed like a living thing, blanketed every inch of his being.

"No...!"

And then the power hit him. An explosive tidal wave of supremacy that ripped, dismantled, renewed

and improved every fibre, every cell, every DNA particle in his body and all he could do was clutch his head and scream. His body spasmed wildly, tail thrashing, legs bucking. He clutched at his hair, desperate to hold onto anything solid because surely the world was falling away beneath him.

And perhaps it was. He was rising above the ground, golden power twisting and convulsing around him like a constricting serpent. He felt it pumping in his veins, replacing blood with raw energy. He felt his bones being shattered, becoming something intangible yet stronger.

He screamed and screamed as his body was essentially remodelled into the new, improved Zidane.

Into kami.

He longed for darkness. Longed for unconsciousness to take him in its cool, numb embrace, but it rejected him the way a body can reject a transplanted organ. He was forced to float above the floor, shrieking while he was being ripped apart inside out and rebuilt.

The walls of the castle trembled. Outside, dark clouds circled and plummeted downward.

Lightening struck the giant blade of the castle and a sudden flash flood swept through the streets of Alexandria. The ground shook. Ornament and plates were shaken off their shelves and dashed against the ground, shattering. Chandeliers trembled and diamonds fell from their beams. A giant crack snaked up the side of East tower and it crumbled, killing several unlucky enough to linger beneath.

The power ebbed through Zidane's veins and obliterated his senses, his thoughts, his emotions, his memories. The power pulsed round him; unlike anything he'd ever known, so much more potent than drugs, than lust, than Trance. He thought his skin would split, unable to contain the godly power mounting within him.

And as suddenly as it had come, it was over.

He lay motionless on the ground, exhausted, yet somehow replenished in a way he couldn't understand. He wasn't panting; his breathing was steady. His heart beat slowly. His skin tingled pleasantly. Any weariness or illness he had experienced previously had ebbed away with the onslaught of power. Where had all the discomfort fled? Where was the mind-splitting pain?

He opened his eyes and gasped. Everything was blue and red, mostly the latter. In fact, there was only a single blue entity in his vision and that was Murmur, standing triumphantly over his figure like a hunter gloating over his vanquished prey.

Zidane stood and alarming found himself treading air. Floating. Flying. He blinked and the walls shuddered. His tail twitched and throne launched into the air and shattered against a doorway.

“What...” Zidane said and his voice echoed, thundered, caused the air to tremor.

“You are kami,” Murmur said. “You are the angel of death. You are the reaper.”

Zidane slowly raised his hands and looked at them. They were golden. He was golden. He was kami.

“You have completed your purpose. You have become what Terra desired. You will restore the people of Terra, kami.” She paused. “Come. With have much to do.”

(beings that transcend life and death)

Zidane shook his head and the castle wall's groaned beneath the weight of his power. "But I —"

"No buts, kami," Murmur scolded lightly. "We must travel to the Ifa Tree, where the souls wait to be divided. Before the reaping begins you must first overwhelm the Gaian souls with Terran souls, understand? That way, the Terran souls can access the vessels you provide with unhindered ease."

Zidane's head was throbbing. An idea was thatching in his enhanced mind.

(if you agree then you will have influence over every soul, dead and alive)

(don't you remember what you said? What you swore to me? Why not turn it back on Murmur?)

He felt the power tingling at his fingertips. Could sense all the potential power,

(you have the power, position and the motive to do it)

incomprehensible amounts, begging to be released. And he could hear the souls of both Gaia and Terra, whispering in his mind, no longer the awful screeching he had experienced when Murmur had first arrived, but something feathery, softer. He

took a moment to contemplate this and realised why: he was in control now. He was a god. He was their god. He had unthinkable power. He could control the dead, the living. Both were at his disposal.

His mind positively wallowed in it.

“Yes,” Zidane said finally. “I will come. I am the reaper.”

11. Angels and Gods

Myshu: haha... yeah i TOTALLY knew about... Terra being red and Gaia being blue. I TOTALLY knew that. I was just um.. testing everyone. :runs into corner and cries: Thanks for pointing it out though! I would've carried on making that stupid mistake otherwise.

Chapter Eleven

A n g e l s . A n d . G o d s

“The soul at its highest is found like God, but an angel gives a closer idea of Him. That is all an angel is: an idea of God.”

-Meister Eckhart

“Wh-what on Gaia was that!?”

The castle had ceased its shuddering and the extent of the damage was revealed. Ornaments decades old and priceless china had been reduced to a shattered mosaic of sharp fragments on the marble floor. A crack had snaked its way up the wall to their left and rendered the stone asunder. One of the chandeliers had been torn completely from the many hooks that suspended it and had exploded in a spray of glass upon impact.

Freya, Mikoto, Eiko, Steiner, Beatrix and Amarant had fought valiantly to maintain their balance and dignity while the tremors dismantled the castle and Alexandria (though they were blissfully ignorant of the state of the town) but had failed miserably.

Sprawled atop Steiner with shards of glass embedded in pale skin, Beatrix, who had been arguing with Eiko moments beforehand why entry through the double doors to see Zidane was prohibited, groaned and sat up. She stared at aforementioned doors, only to discover all that remained were two lengths of splintered wood, hanging from broken hinges.

“Dear gods, the castle!” she heard Steiner hiss, which forced her to reconsider the uncomfortable position in which she found herself.

“What... happened...?” she murmured, removing her bulk from Steiner and gingerly pressing fingers against bloody wounds.

The others bore scrapes such as hers though none severe; mercifully the larger shards of glass had penetrated elsewhere, but the fragments crunched beneath her boots (how she thanked her thick soles) like bones.

The group salvaged their balance and stood, stared through the obliterated doors.

Gold.

The first noticeable thing: gold. It radiated like the sun, burning, furious. And Beatrix could sense the immeasurable waves of power, as palpable as the glass beneath her feet. What had Freya been saying about Zidane becoming a god? Surely this was...

The group moved as one through the gaping hole, splinters jutting like teeth of a monster at their sides, and stared across the grand hall where Garnet's throne had previously been situated (now a good thirty feet from its previous location, as if tossed by a giant's hand).

Hovering three feet above the floor, which had cratered under the immeasurable power, the intricate tiled design ruined, was Zidane and Garnet, locked in embrace and kissing with heated intensity. The state of the decimated hall was shocking enough, but Zidane, features practically extinguished by the golden glare emanating from his body, paled the severity of the disaster in comparison.

"Is that... Dagger?" Eiko whispered.

Mikoto stepped forward, cocked her head. “No. It is Murmur. Any trace of Garnet... is gone.”

Steiner tore his gaze from the kissing couple, face twisting into a mask of utter confusion and despair. “What is this you speak of? Her Majesty is right there!”

“That is not Garnet. Not anymore. It is merely the shell of Garnet. Her soul has vanished and now... only Murmur remains.”

“Rubbish!” Steiner scoffed. “My eyes do not —”

“Enough, Steiner,” Beatrix intervened. “I believe her. Think about it; Her Majesty has been acting most strange of late. The imprisonment of Zidane, her upkeep of his cell’s condition, her perpetual sour mood. What they claim makes sense. Look with your heart, not your eyes.”

Steiner bowed his head, submissive. “I just... didn’t want to... believe...”

“I don’t understand,” Freya said. “Garnet... is she...?”

The silence spoke for itself. Steiner dropped to his knees, Beatrix swiftly following.

“And... Zidane? Does this mean that... that he...”

“Has become,” Mikoto supplied and any further explanation was cut short by another explosion.

0000

Murmur tilted her head as to subtly end the kiss. She'd never felt so invigorated, so alive. His hands, locked about her waist, were beacons of power; she could feel the immense energy pulsing through her bare skin, infecting the blood in her veins with the most delicious of poisons. If only Garland could see her now! How the old fool's face would fall!

“We have company, kami,” she whispered.

Zidane didn't break eye contact (his eyes were flecked with gold; stray fragments of power swimming in azure iris' that were quickly turning amber) but nodded faintly, expression grim and somewhat neutral. Perfect.

“It would be most unfortunate,” she went on, “to have any... interruptions. Would it not?”

He made no outward gesture of concession, but flicked his eyes toward the group. The floor erupted in an explosion of tiles, rocketing into the air with a

deafening roar before sprinkling down as concrete rain. The intruders screamed, more shocked than hurt, and Murmur tightened her grip round Zidane's waist, ecstatic.

"Excellent. Let us move on, kami. The time of reaping is at hand."

His gaze shifted back and the piercing power washed over her countenance like a sheet of silk.

"Where?" he whispered. The castle trembled.

"The dead tree, love. Where the souls await to be divided."

"Iifa?"

"Yes. Incapable of dividing it may be, but Terra's souls wait with bated breath behind the gates of its roots. You will tear open the portal and the Terran souls will overwhelm Gaia's, only then may the reaping begin."

"Will... Gaia's souls be there, too?"

"Yes. Both streams are at your disposal; they congregate at the roots of Iifa where the gate to the Eternal Stream awaits."

"The Eternal Stream?"

Murmur's smile was that of pity. "Oh, love. Garland was a fool to let you slip from grasp. You know so little. The Eternal Stream is the place where all souls go once death claims them. The Iifa Tree stopped that process and discharged them as Mist. Now it is dead..." She shrugged, further explanation unnecessary. "Enough time has been wasted. Let us proceed."

Zidane said nothing but tightened his grip on Murmur and ascended, slowly at first, face tilted toward the roof. He held Murmur close and raised a hand. The ceiling exploded outward, any stray rubble rebounded off a field of power Zidane created, and they flew through the hole.

He took a moment to hover over the town, drinking in the destruction instigated by his hand. He absently noted that seeing was somewhat unnecessary; he could sense every soul that dwelled below, and even recognise some: the boss, Blank, Ruby...

He could sense the dead too, freshly killed at the expense of his power. He could see the blue souls drifting toward the Iifa like leaves coasting down stream. He heard their mournful whispers and somewhere he heard Mikoto, too, but he pushed her

thoughts aside. She was irrelevant. *They* were irrelevant. All of them.

The town itself was a mess. The flash flood had washed away stalls and their respective owners and animals, children, plants alike. The dark clouds still circled overhead, thick and bruised. Thunder rumbled from their brooding depths. There was fire below, too, and crumbled buildings where earthquakes had shaken the very foundations of the earth.

He did this. All of this.

Zidane didn't waste a backward glance as he gathered his energy and soared into the distance, Murmur smirking in his arms.

0000

"I can't believe it!"

Steiner cradled the unconscious Beatrix as Amarant hoisted Freya to her feet in an uncharacteristic display of assistance. Eiko was running circles around a mound of rubble, Mikoto staring distractedly at the gaping hole Zidane had just made in the ceiling.

“Believe it or not,” Amarant said, “monkey-boy is taking this reaper thing a little too seriously for my liking. I say we follow ’im and bust his gods-damn head open and —”

“Oh shut up, you fool.” Freya dusted herself off, picking out a shard of mosaic embedded in her cheek. “I don’t really understand what’s going on but the Zidane I know — the Zidane we all know — wouldn’t do a thing like this without reason. He must be... controlled in some way.”

“Possessed,” Steiner concurred, “in the same way Her... Her Highness...” His voice faltered.

“Your presumptions are incorrect,” Mikoto said. “He must make a conscious decision to become kami. He is perfectly sane and in control.”

Eiko charged up to the female genome and shouted wildly: “Then what do we do? Where did he go? What’s he gonna do?”

“There’s little we can do. Zidane is... immortal. We won’t be able to kill him, let alone stop him. As for the latter, he goes to the Tree of Life, the gateway to the souls, where he will open a portal for the Terran souls to enter Gaia. Then the reaping will begin.”

The little group fidgeted, tried to think, and failed.

“I guess all we can do is follow and do anything we can to help,” Steiner decided. “The Queen she... she kept the Invincible in the dockyards... if it’s still in tact —”

“It’s the quickest airship on the planet!” Eiko yelled. “Let’s go!”

“What nonsense you speak!” Mikoto snorted. “What ‘help’ do you think you can give? There’s no stopping him now.”

Freya strode past her, lance in hand. “Well, that’s your opinion. And besides, I’d rather be doing something than sitting around and waiting for the world to end. Are you coming?”

Mikoto paused, shifted on the spot a little awkwardly. “Fine. But I have no doubt that any attempts to inhibit his actions will be futile.” She paused. “Or at least, if he feels merciful, result in death.”

0000

He couldn’t help himself, really. With such ridiculous power at his expenditure he simply

couldn't resist to... well, expend it. Flying unaided was an experience that sent heady waves of pleasure coursing through his veins. He felt weightless, invincible. He raised a hand and a field exploded in a wall of mud beneath him and he couldn't help himself: he laughed. Not a manic, evil laugh, just one of utter joviality. Having such power was... invigorating!

Zidane found flying surprisingly easy. It required a simple balancing act of power. He released a steady amount downward, which elevated him from the ground. A burst of energy directed right propelled him left and a burst of energy left propelled him right. It demanded little concentration and he picked it up quickly.

"I am so glad you changed your perspective on things." Murmur's admission tore him from his fun. "I was so... worried you would remain adverse to the plan forever and the Third would have to substitute."

Zidane spared her a glance and revulsion overwhelmed him. He could drop her now. Send her to the ground. Destroy her. But now was not the time and besides... he needed her.

She stroked his cheek, the other clinging to his vest. Her hair — Garnet's hair — haloed her pale face and quivered in the wind, soft as feathers on his bare arms. The smirk had temporarily vanished and an airy, somewhat guileless expression had taken its place. She was still beautiful, but she wasn't his Garnet, and because of that he forced himself not to flinch at her touch. What she had done sickened him, though he refused to let it show.

“Is the power so great, kami?” she whispered, fingers trailing down his neck.

He averted his gaze to the landscape blurring beneath them and thought hard of Garnet, his poor, sweet Garnet, who had unwittingly victimised herself to save him. Gods, he missed her already, but he strained his perception and strived to imagine that the real Garnet was cradled safe in his arms as the continent whisked away beneath them, giving way to a landscape of inky waves.

“Yes, love,” he replied. “It is. I... I'm so glad you gave it to me. I can't believe it myself. It's incredible.”

She smiled knowingly, lovingly. Zidane prayed the gods give his acting skills strength and carefully injected fragments of his power into Murmur's

being, essentially drugging her in a hope to dull her senses enough to buy his act.

“We’ll rule Gaia when this is over, kami. You and I. You will be god of the new Terra and I’ll be at your side, your angel.”

Zidane bit down a snort of laughter; managed to maintain an impassive façade. He wondered then, now he was a god, whom did he have to pray to? Himself? Ridiculous. There were infinite higher orders above him, he imagined, and therefore was he not more an angel than a god? It is not for the angels to decide the outcome of the reaping; they merely reap. His power was immeasurable, yes, but he was no god.

Best not entertain such thoughts to Murmur though, he thought; let her dwell within her twisted fantasy. It wouldn’t last long.

As he flew he left behind a radiant arch of gold that eventually faded and disappeared. Directly beneath him, the sea dipped beneath the onslaught of his power, creating a long, shallow depression that trailed in his wake just like the golden arch. Even the clouds dented slightly. He was curious to test the extent of his power but had enough modesty to guess that such an assessment could lead to the very

destruction of planet. It would be like Kuja and Terra all over again.

Beneath him, he could see the souls of Gaia drifting slowly toward the Outer Continent, toward the Iifa Tree he guessed, where they would join the Eternal Stream. They moved slowly but purposely, with direction, like a leaf falling from branch to ground. He wondered if the journey was instinctive or if the souls retained enough thoughts to guide them. Perhaps the pull was magnetic; they were unable to resist. Being the newly fledged keeper of these souls, he wondered if he should know such things.

His reflections were shattered again by Murmur, who had the audacity (or sheer arrogance) to kiss him. Zidane returned the gesture obligingly and she moaned into his mouth as a bubble of power eased into her system, courtesy to Zidane's subtle adjustments. She went weak against him, grip slackened so he had to use both hands to support her limp form. Thrown off by the alterations in weight, he attuned his power to aid equilibrium and rocked unsteadily from side to side.

"Your power..." was all she could whisper when he broke the kiss. Her voice was thick and her eyes

lustful and heavy-lidded.

He allowed himself a small, satisfied smirk that she, in her drugged state, failed to acknowledge and continued toward the distant Iifa.

Short chap, I know. Apologies. But review! :-) I have absolutely no idea when the next chapter will be up, so apologies in advance for that, too.

Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Copyright Information	2
Table of Contents	3
Summary	4
1. Blue	5
2. Murmur	19
3. Song Without A Name	37
4. Mikoto	53
5. Call The Dead	73
6. Between Three People	91
7. Silence	109
8. Light and Dark	131
9. Escape	147
10. Becoming	166
11. Angels and Gods	185